

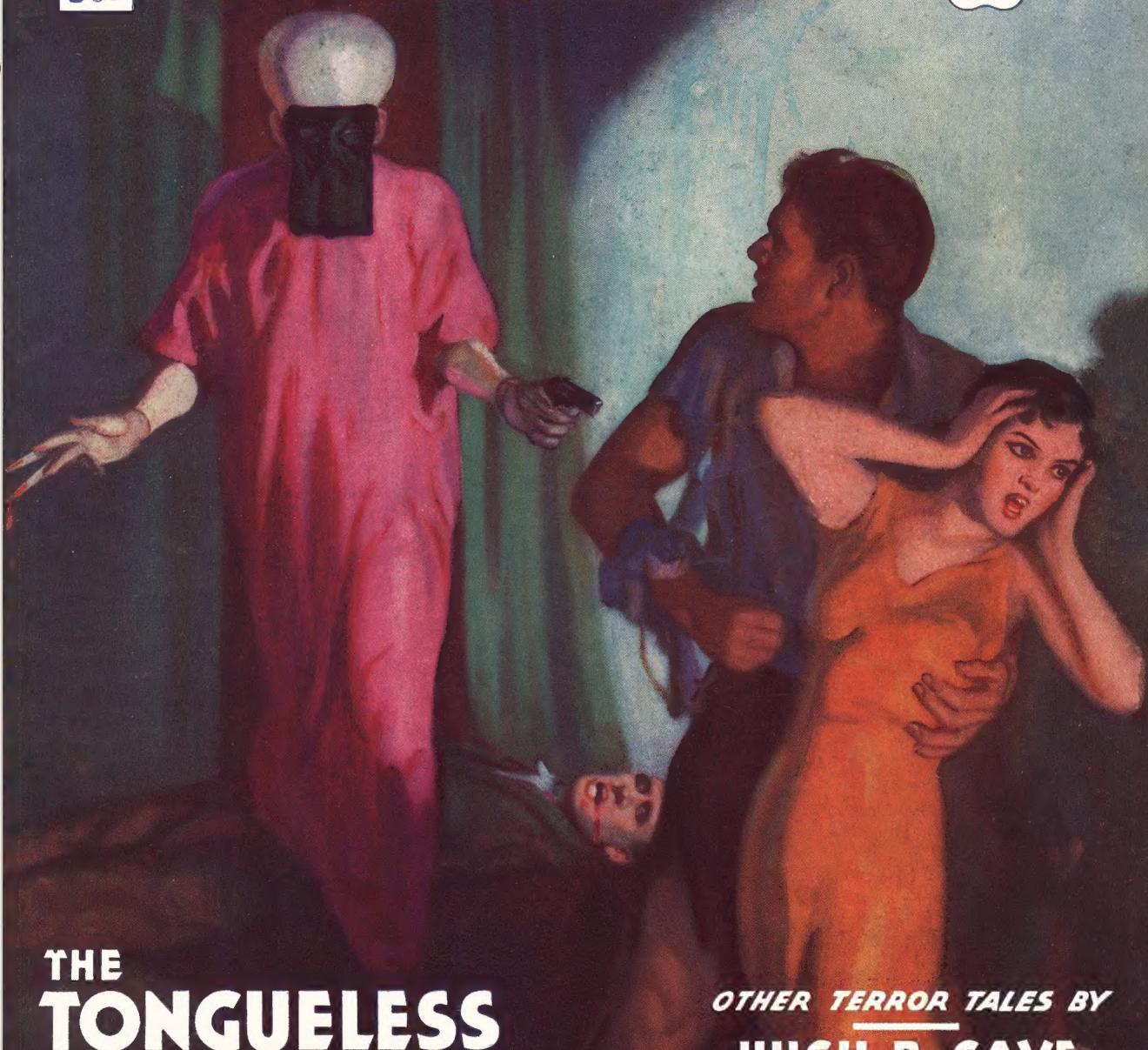
APRIL

10¢

# DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



10¢ DIME MYSTERY Magazine



## THE TONGUELESS HORROR

MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTE

by WYATT BLASSINGAME

OTHER TERROR TALES BY

HUGH B. CAVE  
ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT  
WILLIAM B. RAINY

AND OTHER FAMOUS AUTHORS

# Health Authorities **WARN** Against **BULGING** Waistline!

The New York Times

## LARGE WAISTLINE HELD HEALTH PERIL

Middle-Aged Man Who Keeps His Small Lives Longer, Government Bureau Says.

### FIGURES SHOW DIRECT LINK

Overweight People Have Worst of It in Mortality Tables Covering 15 Causes.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (AP).—The man who keeps his waistline small when he reaches middle age is the most likely to win the race for health, is the conclusion drawn from a new study of the relation of weight to physical defects just published by the Public Health Service.

"By the time that middle age is reached, these figures indicate, it is a definite advantage to be under the average weight for height," says the report.

It also shows "a great excess of mortality among overweight persons, whatever the age, and also an excess among young adult underweight persons."

The conclusions are drawn from records of more than 3,000 men from 1909 to 1928, showing the ratio of actual deaths to expected mortality, according to different weight groups. In the following table, figures below 100 indicate less than the expected death rate; those above 100 indicate more than the expected death rate:

Weight Class.	20-29.	30-39.	40-49.	Over 50 and
25 pounds or more underweight	118	105	83	77
10 to 20 lbs. overweight	101	94	76	85
5 lbs. under to 5 lbs. overweight	92	84	87	92
10 to 20 pounds overweight	99	88	94	80
25 to 45 pounds overweight	113	123	125	119
50 lbs. or more overweight	163	143	144	130

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### The WEIL BELT will safely REDUCE your WAISTLINE!

DON'T WAIT....FAT IS DANGEROUS! Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity.

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● So many of our customers are delighted with the wonderful results obtained with the Weil Belt that we want you to TRY IT FOR TEN DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE!

**GREATLY IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE!** The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—THREE INCHES OF FAT GONE—OR NO COST!

**THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION DOES IT!** ● You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work, or sit... its massage-like action gently but persistently eliminating fat with every move you make!

● Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't cost you one penny!

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10¢ DIME  
MYSTERY  
MAGAZINE

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Volume Five

April, 1934

Number One

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FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

Unholy Night!.....	By Hugh B. Cave	10
<i>They called it "Fulsom's Folly" and whispered shocking tales of the dread things which transpired there. Then, on a dark night of storm, two young couples sought shelter within its gloomy walls. . . .</i>		

THREE MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

The Tongueless Horror.....	By Wyatt Blassingame	54
<i>A ruthless slaughter of the innocents drove John Hewett along that hideous trail—where he tasted the shuddering fear of creeping, silent death!</i>		
Give Me Your Soul!.....	By Mindret Lord	82
<i>Out of a nameless, unremembered past, she came to him, bringing strange happiness—and a terror sufficient to warp and dull the soul!</i>		
Death Dancers.....	By Arthur Leo Zagat	100
<i>Their clothes were winding sheets, their weapons madness—when they held their obscene carnival of doom on Dark Mountain.</i>		

SHORT TERROR TALES

When the Rats Fed.....	By William B. Rainey	44
<i>A girl's piercing scream brought Byron Kent to that inner room where the rats fed.</i>		
The Restless Corpse.....	By G. T. Fleming-Roberts	72
<i>Arthur Titus did not believe that a man once dead could ever walk again.</i>		

—AND—

Dark Council.....	A Department	121
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Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer

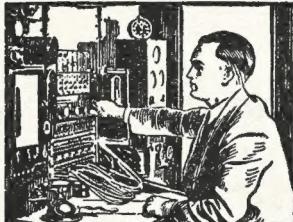
Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

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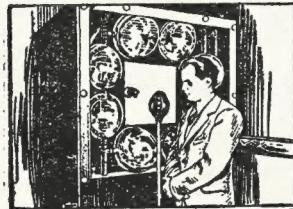
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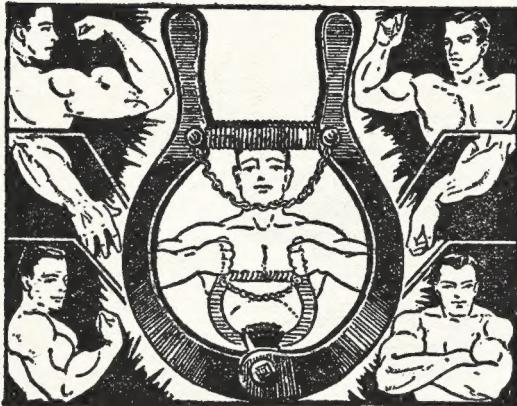
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29x5.25-18	22.90	29x5.25-18	23.45
29x5.25-19	22.95	29x5.25-19	23.45
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29x5.50-19	23.35	29x5.50-19	23.95
29x5.60-19	23.35	29x5.60-19	24.15
29x5.75-19	23.45	29x5.75-19	24.35
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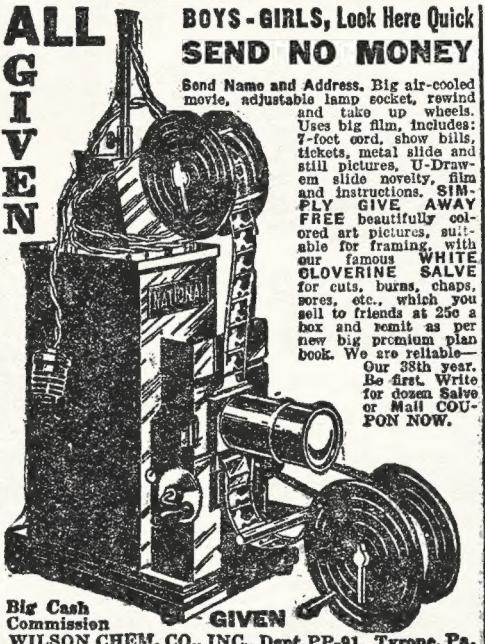
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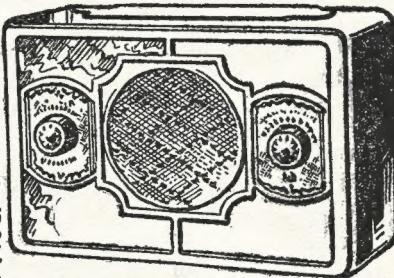
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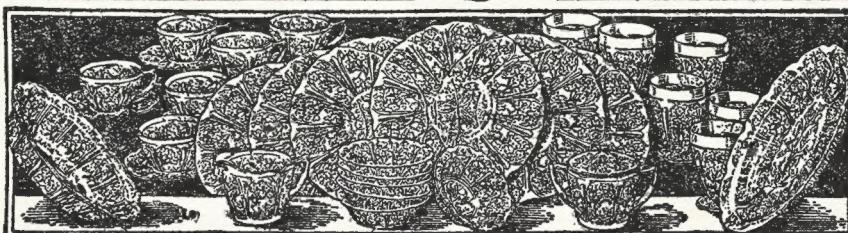
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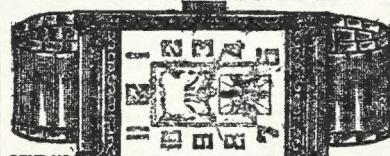
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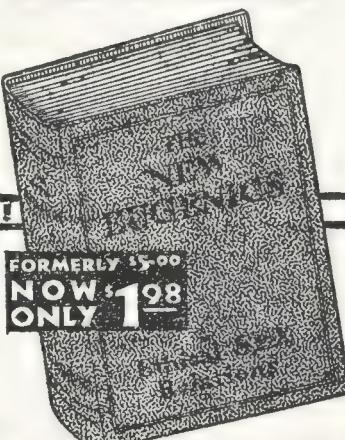
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# Unholy Night!

By

Hugh B. Cave

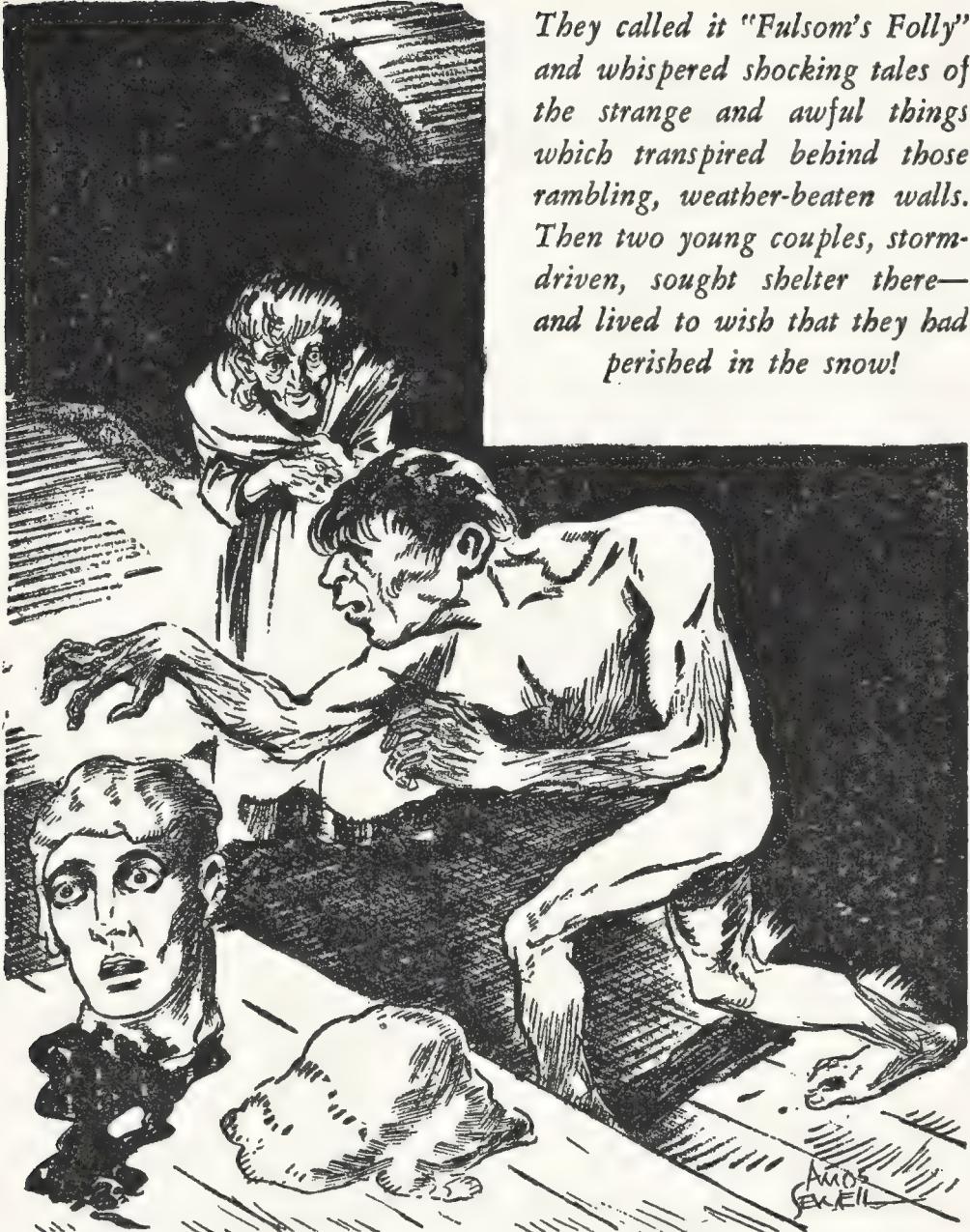
*'Author of "Devils in the Dark," etc.*

Complete  
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THE parchment-faced old woman worked her thin lips into a crooked smile, rocked back and forth on her small feet, and said leeringly in a sing-song voice:

"Well, ain't we lucky now? Here it is a terrible stormy night, and the wind brings us a handsome young man and his



*They called it "Fulsom's Folly" and whispered shocking tales of the strange and awful things which transpired behind those rambling, weather-beaten walls. Then two young couples, storm-driven, sought shelter there—and lived to wish that they had perished in the snow!*

pretty wife. You ain't afraid of us, are you, dearie?"

Carol Lane retreated step by step from the old woman's gaze, seeking the security of her husband's arms. Alan Lane stood rigid, glaring first at the woman, then at the woman's husband—the middle-aged, gray-haired man who called himself Malcolm Converse.

Two hours ago, in a second-rate hotel in a small town fifty miles south, a hawk-faced, shrewd proprietor had leaned over the desk and said significantly, in an undertone:

"Fulsom's Folly, they calls that place, sir. And it's more'n that, I'm a-tellin' you. It's the only house on the road, and it's a queer, broodin' kind of place

with queer people livin' in it. On a night like this there ain't a soul hereabouts as would go near it. More'n one person has traveled that road on wicked nights like this, with the wind a-howlin' and the sea ragin', and never come out t'other end! You two people be a-honeymoonin', I can see that; and if I was you—"

The wind was howling now, moaning through the upper recesses of this strange structure like a voice in torment. A roar of not-too-distant surf beat a muttering accompaniment, as gale-whipped water foamed over jagged rocks, somewhere outside. Alan Lane wished that he had taken the hotel proprietor's advice and spent the night in town. But there had seemed no good reason why they should not press on—and they had had no intention of stopping at "Fulsom's Folly." Only for the rising fury of the storm and a stalled engine, half a mile down the road, they would now have been safely at their destination in the next town. Lane frowned. A strange house, indeed! And it nurtured stranger people—Alfred, the butler, whose tongue, Malcolm Converse had told them, was forever silent; Peter Vine, the caretaker, whose face was a floating, expressionless mask beneath tangled black hair; Malcolm Converse, himself, whose studied politeness was somehow suggestive of things evil and abnormal; and Nora, his wife, so small, so shriveled that she seemed a child, yet in reality was old, very old.

A strange house, and strange people. Yet only half an hour ago, when Alan Lane had stumbled blindly through the vicious storm outside, with his wife sobbing incoherently beside him, half frozen and nearly blinded by swirling snow, the huge, gaunt structure had seemed a haven of retreat.

Now he and Carol were destined to spend the night here. The storm had risen to even greater heights; its sinister

voice was a whining howl of triumph outside.

Lane shrugged and turned to his wife, trying to hide his growing uneasiness behind a cheerful grin. He and she were not the only ones who had sought shelter in this sinister old house tonight! According to Malcolm Converse and the old woman, two others had been driven here by the storm—a young six-footer, Jerry Cassidy by name, and his girl companion, both suffering from cold and exposure. Their car, too, had yielded to the howling sweep of the storm, had in fact careened off the road and cracked up, so that Cassidy had come stumbling to the house, seeking shelter, with a terrified girl in his arms . . . . The girl, Myra Carver, was now sleeping somewhere upstairs, with Cassidy occupying the adjoining room.

"Well, why don't you two go to bed?" Nora Converse demanded evilly. "Your wife needs her beauty sleep, young man! *Don't* you, dearie? You want your handsome young husband all to yourself, so he can tell you how pretty you are." Her thin lips curled bitterly. "Come along then! I'll show you to your room!"

Malcolm Converse said nothing. The woman paced rapidly to the door, motioning Alan Lane and Carol to follow her.

With short quick steps the strange old woman marched down the central corridor, ascended a wide, winding staircase. At the top of the stairs she halted, held a glowing match to a gas-jet in the wall, said curtly:

"This place is so old, you'd think we'd have electricity up here now! But we ain't, so you'll have to make the best of it."

She paced on again, stopped suddenly as a door opened ahead of her. A tall, straight figure, garbed in gray flannels,

a long smock, leather slippers, stepped over the threshold.

"This is no time to be working," the woman frowned. "You should be in bed."

The man shrugged his shoulders, glanced casually at Carol and Lane. He was obviously Malcolm Converse's son, possessing the same even features, the same large build.

"This is Russell," the woman said curtly. "My boy."

Russell smiled, extended his hand. "How do you do?" His smile changed to a pleasant grin. "Devil of a night out, isn't it? We're right over the water, you know." He laughed good-naturedly. "This old house is full of creaks and groans, and on a night like this we hear every last one of them."

Nora Converse snorted, dragged her guests away. She stopped before a closed door, opened it, and made a light in the room beyond. Stepping back, she smiled evilly, glared at Carol and Lane as if she hated them.

"Well, you can be alone together now, and make love all you want to, and no one'll bother you. That is, I *hope* no one will!"

THE door clicked shut. Alan Lane and his wife, standing close together, studied the room in which they were to spend the remainder of the night. It was a small room, low-ceilinged, poorly furnished, with faded rose-paper on the wall and a worn carpet covering three-fourths of the unpainted floor.

Lane walked slowly to the single window, raised the shade, and peered out. The drooping glass rattled to the impact of a sweeping wind outside. Another sound, the thunder of storm surf roaring over unseen rocks far below, beat its way into the chamber.

"Fulsom's Folly," Lane muttered. "Strange, queer place."

He groped in his coat pocket, produced a folded travel-leaflet which he had taken from the hotel desk that morning. Scuffing the pages, he read the printed words aloud.

"Fulsom's Folly. This most interesting house is situated midway between the towns of Thornton and Gorham, on Route 17-C. The structure was erected in 1870 by one Asa Fulsom, and was dubbed 'Fulsom's Folly' because the builder apparently allowed his imagination full play, with fantastic results.

"The huge house contains eighteen legitimate rooms, nine on the first floor, seven on the second, two in the attic or loft. The loft, contrary to all accepted rules of architectural design, extends twenty feet or more beyond the base of the building and actually overhangs the sixty-foot cliff upon which the house is built.

"The building itself is a veritable maze of corridors, stairways, and so-called secret chambers. The cellar alone contains many strange rooms and extends deep into the cliff upon which the house is built. Other oddly designed 'secret rooms' are scattered throughout the upper part of the structure.

"Fulsom's Folly is at present owned by Mrs. Nora Converse, a direct descendant of the builder, and is occupied by the Converse family. Unfortunately, during recent years it has not been open to inspection by the public, but—"

Lane stopped reading, stood suddenly motionless, his head uplifted. A soft scratching sound had invaded the room, as if someone in the corridor outside, or in an adjoining chamber, were dragging sharp fingernails along the wall.

Lane turned abruptly to face his wife, saw that she too had turned and was staring intently, fearfully, at the wall near the bed.

Then suddenly Lane stiffened, gave

voice to a low exclamation. He took a step backward. Carol, stumbling against him, clung to him with nerveless hands, trembling in every muscle.

With startled, unbelieving eyes, Lane stared unblinkingly at a section of the wall above the bed. That section was slowly moving outward leaving a widening black aperture.

Then there appeared something else, something that came forward with tantalizing slowness to fill the gaping space. In the aperture leered a face, a ghastly white face which hung like a floating death's head, suspended in emptiness with nothing to support it. Like a hideous three-dimensional oil painting it hung there, framed in blackness.

The mouth was open, displaying crooked, gleaming teeth. The eyes were twin tubes of immeasurable hate, boring straight into Lane's own. The face itself was a thin, gaunt gargoyle of evil incarnate.

Lane stood rigid, returning the thing's evil glare. His hands doubled into fists, and he took a slow step forward, freeing himself from the clutching fingers of the girl beside him.

Then, abruptly, he was staring at nothing. The face was no longer there; the wall was once more a solid surface, unbroken by any black aperture.

For a full moment Lane stood utterly without motion, fists clenched, lips curled in a snarl. But there was nothing to snarl at. Slowly he advanced, reached out a lean hand to explore the wall with probing fingers. Behind him, Carol said in a low voice:

"Be careful, Alan! Oh God—don't!"

He hesitated, then turned, and took her in his arms. He said savagely: "All right, we're getting out of here. Out of this room, out of the house. Storm or no storm—"

He stopped talking. From somewhere

nearby came a sound that stifled the words on his lips and sent a sort of tingling, apprehensive tension through all his muscles. The sound came again—a shrill, jangling cacophony of hideous laughter, full of menace and triumph. It sucked the breath from Lane's throat, left him staring with wide eyes at the wall.

Somewhere in the maze of corridors and chambers which networked the surrounding darkness, a woman was laughing shrilly. The sound rose to a hoarse cackle, then ceased abruptly, leaving grim significant silence in its wake.

With a low growl rumbling in his throat, Lane strode to the door, clamped one hand on the knob. Then, very slowly, the color ebbed from his face. He took a step backward, and another, and stood rigid, staring at the wooden panels.

*The door was locked.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Darkness and Terror

IN THE living-room downstairs, the clock on the mantel struck once, with a hollow, resonant whine. Malcolm Converse, sitting before the fire, glanced up and scowled. From the servants' quarters in the rear came a short, stumpy shape, pacing along the central corridor.

The man's feet were encased in heavy woolen socks in lieu of slippers; and he wore a ragged red bathrobe over dirty pajamas. Muttering to himself, he stood in the living-room doorway, stared at Malcolm Converse, and said thickly:

"You want me to lock up now? Huh?"

Converse nodded heavily. "Yes. Yes, Peter."

Peter Vine, the caretaker, made a grumbling noise in his throat as he turned away. Later, returning past the living-room door, he again glared sullenly at the master of the house; but Converse neither looked up nor spoke. Still mum-

bling, Vine waddled slowly back to the servants' quarters.

In the living-room, the clock on the mantel said one-ten. Malcolm Converse stood erect, sighed and paced slowly from the room. The soft thud of his footsteps died into silence.

No human sound disturbed the stillness of the house. Outside, the wind whined fretfully, sullenly. The hands of the antique clock moved sluggishly onward. . . .

At the far end of the upstairs corridor, a door inched open. A flashlight gleamed dully. Behind the light loomed the thick-shouldered, six-foot frame of the man who called himself Jerry Cassidy—the man whose girl companion lay ill in a nearby chamber.

Fully clothed, Cassidy tiptoed forward and leaned against the closed door of the girl's room. His fingertips beat a soft tattoo. Inside, a bed creaked softly. The door was drawn open from within.

Cassidy entered, closed the door, leaned against it, said quietly: "You look scared."

"I need a drink," the girl said. She, too, was fully dressed. She took a long drink from the pint bottle Cassidy handed her. Licking her lips, she said stiffly: "You—you're not going through with it?"

Cassidy patted her hand, grinned fondly down at her. "Why not?"

"I don't like this place," the girl declared. "It gives me the living creeps. If they find you prowling around in the dark—"

"Don't tell me you're letting an old house get your nerve, partner?" Cassidy ruffled her hair. "We got in here all right, didn't we? And if that yellow piece of drift paper didn't lie—if there's really some poor devil being kept here in need of outside help, well—" Cassidy grinned again. "Since when have you been a scare-cat!"

The girl stared at him with wide eyes,

stifled a further protest as he opened the door and paced slowly down the darkened hallway. At the end of the passage he hesitated, advanced warily into a second corridor, toward the rear of the house. The flashlight showed him the way, revealed a flight of narrow stairs winding up into blackness.

He ascended cautiously, reached the top, stood motionless again. The whine of the wind, here in the upper part of the house, was a shrill wailing voice, as of some tormented creature clamoring for admittance. The flashlight's glowing eye was a macabre intruder in a limitless vault of whispering gloom.

"Fulsom's Folly," Cassidy mumbled. "Damned good name for a place like this."

He prowled forward, reached the end of a tunnel-like passage, leaned against the wall and breathed slowly, heavily, staring about him as if lost. The flashlight swept a slow circle, came to rest on a stained-glass window. He paced toward it, pressed his face against the glass, endeavored to see out. From far below came the monotonous roar of storm surf.

Cassidy scowled. He thrust a hand into his trousers pocket and brought out a folded square of yellow paper. Holding the light on it, he studied it intently, then studied the maze of corridors extending away before him. The walls of the central tunnel trembled under the impact of the wind as he paced between them.

The tunnel ended in a blank. The flashlight's glare swept to the left, revealed a short flight of uncarpeted steps. The steps, seven in number, terminated in a stumpy door.

CASSIDY stared at the barrier, licked his lips nervously. Uneasiness caught at him and left him trembling. The incessant scream of the storm smothered the sibilant whisper of his breath. The

storm, up here, possessed an evil voice, sinister and triumphant.

That voice smothered all other sounds. Smothered the ominous creak of a loose board in the narrow passage through which Cassidy had just prowled.

Slowly he ascended the stairs. Flat against the door at the top he crouched, listening. His knuckles rapped the barrier softly, came away again. In a voice low and guarded, yet loud enough to carry through to the chamber beyond, he called out nervously:

*"Brian! Artel Brian!"*

No answer.

*"Artel Brian!"* Cold sweat gleamed on Cassidy's forehead. "Are you in there?"

He stiffened abruptly, his eyes wide, his tongue pressed tight against his teeth. A strange scratching sound had come from beyond the door, as though some ponderous creature were crawling laboriously over the floor within. The sound came nearer, very slowly. Fascinated by it, Cassidy failed to hear the sinister whisper of light footsteps on the stairs behind him.

A sharp whining voice, plaintive enough to be the voice of a child, came to him through the door.

"Yes? Yes? Who is it?"

Cassidy hesitated, suddenly terrified. He formed an answer with his lips, abandoned it and took an involuntary step backward. He stood staring, then scowled and moved forward again.

"Listen. You don't know who I am. But I'm here to—"

The words died on his lips. From the shadows of the staircase behind him a pair of lean, powerful hands whipped out, made sickening impact against the flesh of his throat. The hands were hot, moist, strong as iron claws. Cassidy tried to scream. The sound gurgled in his throat like bubbling water in a clogged drain.

Reeling drunkenly, he stumbled back-

ward, dragged down by his unseen assailant. His big body crashed to the stairs, rolled grotesquely down the wooden steps to the corridor below. The murderous fingers retained their hellish grip on his neck.

Just once those hands relaxed, as Cassidy thudded against the wall of the passage. A single lurid shriek welled from the young man's throat, shrilled through the entire upper portion of the house, to be swallowed by the whine of the wind outside. Then the powerful fingers clamped down again, buried themselves in writhing flesh.

Cassidy stared with horrified eyes into the face of his assailant. Darkness masked those snarling features, accentuated a pair of glowing, unblinking orbs which seemed hideously detached, as if hanging suspended in space. Darkness made a massive monster of the shape which half-crouched, half-lay above Cassidy's heaving bulk.

The fingers dug deeper. Cassidy's mouth gaped open; his swollen tongue protruded. His struggling body twisted in a convulsive agony, then went limp.

With cold-blooded deliberation the monster leaned back, ran a probing hand over Cassidy's body. A triumphant hiss of breath came from the thing's lips as the exploring fingers discovered the folded square of yellow paper.

Rising swiftly, the menacing shape gathered Cassidy in its arms, swayed unsteadily a moment, then turned abruptly and strode down the long corridor, its loose garments flapping like the wings of a monstrous bat.

Behind it, near the heavy door which had been Cassidy's destination, lay the flashlight which had fallen from the victim's nerveless fingers. Still glowing, the metal tube lay midway up the short flight of stairs and cast a white glare over the surface of the door above.

From behind that door came the same sinister scratching sound which had attracted Cassidy's attention—as if the room's occupant were clawing frantically, desperately with hooked fingers at the unyielding barrier.

With the scratching sounds came unintelligible words in that same plaintive, high-pitched childish voice.

**D**OWNSTAIRS, the girl who called herself Myra Carver sat wearily on the bed in her room. Sat staring at the closed door, waiting for it to open. Twenty minutes had passed since Jerry Cassidy had left her.

Her eyes were ringed now with dark circles, were bloodshot from staring so long. Mechanically she wielded a small nail-file, tried in vain to concentrate her attention on it. Already she had filed one nail until the finger was bleeding.

Anxiety was evident in the constant twitching of her slim body, in the nervous trembling of her lips. She looked at the watch on her wrist, stood up, and paced to the door. She opened it, stepped into the dark corridor. No sound was audible in the entire house—no sound except the ever-present, nerve-wracking whine of storm wind in the upper levels.

The girl stared both ways along the corridor, returned impulsively to the bed and picked up a small flashlight that lay there. A thin ray of light preceded her as she closed the door behind her and tiptoed along the passage.

Her face was pale, her eyes beginning to widen with fear. At the end of the passage she stopped and stood trembling, called out in a low voice:

"Jerry! Jerry, where are you?"

Her own voice came back to her, mocking her.

"Jerry! Oh God, Jerry, I'm afraid of this house! Where are you?"

Her terror increased as she wandered

deeper into the maze. A winding staircase, the same which had lured Jerry Cassidy to the upper reaches of the house, loomed before her. She groped up it, clawing the smooth bannister.

"Jerry! Oh God—"

The darkness leered back at her, beckoned her forward. Her stumbling feet carried her on, through passage after passage, farther and farther into the labyrinth. Then suddenly she stiffened, stared ahead to where a faint glow stabbed the gloom.

A sob left her lips, and she stumbled forward, running. The glow came from a flashlight, lying midway up a narrow flight of steps. At the top of the steps loomed a closed door.

The girl's face went white as chalk. She stooped, picked up the metal tube, stared at it with eyes full of increasing dread. Her gaze fastened on the closed door. She took a step toward it, said in a liquid whisper:

"Jerry—"

Then terror took full possession of her. She screamed, and the sound lost itself in the maze of corridors through which she had prowled. She turned, ran headlong.

Half way through the labyrinth she stopped, exhausted from her wild flight. Swaying, she turned in her tracks, made fists of her hands.

"You little fool!" she told herself. "Afraid of shadows. You damned little fool!"

Deliberately she forced herself to retrace her steps, slowly, stiffly. She had dropped the flashlight which had belonged to Jerry Cassidy. But her nerveless fingers still gripped the other one, and its light cast a trail of pale silver ahead of her.

Behind her, in the gloom of the passage, the uncarpeted floor creaked under the weight of slow-moving feet which were not her own. She stiffened, stood utterly

rigid, turned slowly. A dark shape, darker than the corridor itself, moved toward her.

A sob of relief welled from the girl's lips. She took an eager step forward, cried out in a pathetically joyous voice:

"Jerry! Oh, thank God! I thought—"

The flashlight jerked up in her out-thrust hand, directing its beam full upon the approaching figure. For a split second the light remained rigid. Its pale glow revealed a stooped, menacing shape, flung the shadow of that shape grotesquely against the wall. The girl stared into a shriveled, twisted face—the face of Nora Converse.

A transformation had taken place in those features since Myra Carver had last looked into them. Stark white in the glare of the flashlight, the withered face returned her stare. The thin lips were twisted evilly, revealing broken teeth; the eyes were pits of menace.

Myra Carver's fingers opened convulsively. She stepped back. The flashlight thudded to the floor at her feet, and the terrifying face of the old woman was once more in darkness.

Only the sound of her footfalls remained. Slowly, menacingly they advanced.

Myra Carver's eyes widened, continued to widen until they showed stark staring white. She thrust out a hand to protect herself. Her mouth released a lurid scream of terror.

Then she ran headlong, and as she ran, her parted lips hurled out screams of horror which came from the very depths of her throat—came with such shrill force that they seemed to tear the tongue from her mouth in their struggle for utterance. The girl's nerves gave way completely. Blindly and without reason, she raced back through the maze of midnight corridors, filling the entire upper portion of the house with her fearful cries.

Even when she found the staircase leading to the lower level, and clawed her way down it, she did not cease screaming. Utterly unnerved, she ran through passage after passage, back into that section of the house which was occupied by human beings of her own kind, where she might find protection from the horrors of her own over-wrought mind.

There, almost opposite the door of her own room, she stumbled, fell to the floor and lay moaning. Low words came from her lips, whispered through the silence which seemed thicker, heavier than ever after being disrupted by her own hysterical screaming.

"Jerry—Oh my God, Jerry, we never should have come here! We never should have believed that yellow paper—"

At the end of the corridor a light gleamed dully, came jerkily forward. Behind it loomed the scowling face of the old woman, Nora Converse. How the woman had come so quickly from the upper portion of the house was a question; yet she was here, and muttering viciously as she advanced.

At the same time, a lock clicked raspingly, and a nearby door shuddered open. Alan Lane stepped into the corridor.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Thing on the Table

IT WAS Nora Converse who reached the moaning girl first. Bending above her, the old woman glared down, said irritably:

"Well, what are you scared of? What's got into you anyway? Are you crazy?"

The girl did not answer. Alan Lane, pacing forward, looked first at the old woman, then at the sobbing shape on the floor. His mouth tightened abruptly. Turning, he glanced back to where Carol, his wife, stood watching fearfully from the doorway of their room.

Lane's eyes were narrowed, bloodshot, his face gleaming with sweat. An open-bladed jack-knife, clutched in his cramped fingers, gave mute evidence of how he had labored to get out of the prison-chamber in which he and Carol had been confined.

He stared, made fists of his hands. This girl who called herself Myra Carver had been ill, yes—but ill from shock and exposure. Now there was utter terror in the girl's eyes. And that terror was linked somehow with the series of hysterical screams which had shrilled through the silence of the big house.

Those screams had roused the entire household. Voices were audible now in the lower corridor; lights had been turned on downstairs.

Lane pushed the old woman aside, lifted the terrified girl in his arms. With a quick sideways glance at Carol to follow him, he strode down the corridor with his sobbing burden, aware that Nora Converse was glaring at him resentfully, like a vulture cheated of its prey. . . .

Downstairs in the living-room, Lane lowered the girl to the divan and stepped back, peering at the people around him. Like scurrying rats they had crept from their retreats, aroused by the girl's lurid screaming. Now they stood gaping, apparently waiting for him to assume leadership.

He scowled, turned his attention to the girl, said quietly: "Tell us what happened. What frightened you?"

She opened her eyes, peered up at him fearfully. Her answer came with an effort. "Jerry—Jerry is gone! He went out of his room and upstairs. Then—" The girl's eyes showed white. "Oh God, something horrible has happened to him!"

Lane turned, said evenly to Malcolm Converse: "Hadn't you better go up to Cassidy's room and see if he's there?"

Then he shoved both hands in his pock-

ets and stared again at the strange gathering. They were all here: Alfred, the mute butler, Nora Converse, Russell Converse, Carol, and Peter Vine, the caretaker.

Russell Converse, in smock and leather slippers, came forward quietly, said in a sincere voice: "I'm afraid I don't know just what happened. I was working in my studio when the girl began screaming. If you don't mind—"

Lane nodded, felt grateful for the man's quiet assistance. Of the entire household, Russell Converse seemed the only normal member, the only one not possessed of that queer, brooding distrust which in itself was so sinister.

"So far as I know," Lane said, "Miss Carver went upstairs—"

Malcolm Converse, entering the room, said wearily: "Jerry Cassidy is not in his room. I'm afraid we shall have to search the entire house." His face was pale, strained, his shoulders bent forward as if bowed by a weight of despair. "Alfred, you go downstairs; you, Peter, search the upstairs, with Russell. Nora and I will attend to the rest."

He paced slowly back to the door. The others followed him. A moment later, Lane and Carol and the unfortunate girl on the divan were the room's only occupants.

Myra Carver had again closed her eyes, was breathing slowly, heavily, as if exhausted by her terror. Lane scowled, shook his head sideways. A hand touched his arm. Carol said anxiously, in a low voice:

"I'm afraid, Alan. Afraid of this whole house!"

Lane lit a cigarette, dragged deeply on the white cylinder. Now that the other members of the household had departed, the room was abnormally still; the ticking of the antique clock on the mantel was like the rhythmic beating of a mechanical

heart. Peering into Carol's face, Lane felt a sudden sensation of utter helplessness. No matter what happened, he and she were powerless to leave this macabre manse of gloom. The storm outside had not abated—

Lane's thoughts died abruptly. From the upper reaches of the house came a sound that ate into him, left him standing rigid by the table, his lips clamped tight on the cigarette protruding between them.

Once before, that sound had shrilled through the silence of the big house. Once before, that hideously mocking peal of Satanic laughter had jangled from the bowels of the building, threatening its hearers with some vile menace. Now the sound came again, bringing memories of the ghoul-face which had glared through the aperture in the wall of the prison-room upstairs.

Lane's fists clenched. Savagely he strode across the room, flung open the door leading to the corridor.

Nora Converse, strangely grotesque in her dark gray dress and colored shawl, stumped jerkily into the room and stood staring.

LANE peered into Peter Vine's twisted features, realized that the man was cunning, shrewd—a close-lipped fellow who knew more than appeared on the surface, but would talk only when he wanted to.

Nora Converse said triumphantly: "Well, I found him!"

"You found Cassidy?"

"Of course I did. I ain't lived in this house all these years for nothin'!" The woman's words were vicious, packed with malice. "Are you comin'?"

Lane glanced at Carol, saw a negative reply in the girl's eyes. The old woman was already half way to the door. Peter

Vine stood staring. The girl on the divan was asleep.

With short, jerky steps Nora Converse crossed the threshold, marched down the dimly lighted corridor toward the rear of the house. Trailing her, Lane thought of Myra Carver and scowled at the thought of leaving the girl alone with Vine. Carol, beside him, said almost inaudibly:

"I don't like it, Alan. She—she's such a strange old woman!"

The woman entered a second corridor, then a third, jerking her head around at abrupt intervals to make sure she was being followed. She was using a flashlight, and the weird circle of white light danced ahead of her, eating into the gloom. A flight of wooden steps angled downward into darkness, and the woman descended slowly, clinging to the bannister.

The central portion of the house lay far behind. From far below came a sinister muttering, as of storm surf rumbling on unseen rocks. Lane remembered what he had read in the tourists' guide—how the labyrinthine cellars of the house were built deep into the very cliff upon which the building stood.

Carol's hand found his arm, clung there. "Alan, we never should have left that girl alone upstairs. If anything happens to her—"

Ahead, the flashlight's glow ceased its forward motion. Nora Converse turned, waited for Lane and Carol to come closer.

Lane hesitated, made fists of his hands. They had entered a musty maze of passages far below the house proper. Something in the old woman's eyes stabbed into him, put him on guard. He followed slowly as she thrust open a door and paced jerkily over a narrow threshold.

The flashlight revealed a small, low-ceilinged room with bare floor, wooden walls. A table loomed in the center of

the chamber. Something round and fat squatted on the table-top.

Nora Converse swung about, aimed the light at Lane's face. Her own face, half masked by shadow, was an evil gargoyle, eyes glowing, mouth hooked in a crooked grin.

"Well, what are you waitin' for? I said I'd take you to where he was, didn't I? Why don't you look at him!"

She stepped forward, put the flashlight on the table and moved away from it. Hands hipped, she stood motionless, peered triumphantly at Lane and Carol as they advanced.

Lane felt his eyes growing wide, felt as if they would never close, despite his desire to shut them. Carol, beside him, made a low gasping sound in her throat, caught his arm and clung to it, trembling violently. The thing on the table stared at both of them, as if amused by their horror.

The thing squatted on the far end of the table-top, in a pool of congealed blood which gleamed dark red in the flashlight's glare. Its face was a leering gargoyle, dragging Lane forward. Step by step he advanced, put both hands on the table, stood rigid, gaping.

Thickly, almost inaudibly, he said: "My—God!"

The thing on the table was a severed human head. *The head of the man who had called himself Jerry Cassidy!*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Myra Meets the Killer

**S**TIFFLY, mechanically, Lane picked up the flashlight, groped around the heavy table. The death's-head was a load-stone, luring him nearer. The flashlight's glow, wavering unsteadily, disclosed a door in the room's far wall, and a huddled lifeless shape lying in the corner.

The shape had arms and legs—but no head!

Lane shuddered, licked his lips, aware of the harsh breathing of the girl beside him. Her fingers were like claws on his arm, numbing the flesh. She was controlling herself with an effort. In another moment her emotions would burst the stopper and—

The sound of stealthy footsteps ate into Lane's consciousness. He whirled, his muscles tense, his eyes wide and staring. The flashlight's glare swung in a half circle, then stopped.

At the opposite end of the room the door was closing. It had been open before, wide open. Now a shrivelled hand gleamed on the knob; the crouching form of Nora Converse filled the narrowing aperture.

Like a cat, the old woman had tiptoed noiselessly to the threshold. Her face, corpse-white in the glare of the light, was a leering mask of evil.

Too late, Lane leaped forward, realizing the woman's intent. The door clicked shut before he reached it. A key rasped in the lock. From the far side of the barrier came a shrill peal of laughter.

Lan stopped, stood rigid as the mocking cackle wailed its way into the room. He felt the sound eat into him, felt the color ebb from his face. Then footsteps were audible beyond the barrier. Slow, reluctant footsteps, receding along the corridor. And silence.

Slowly Lane turned, stared into the white, frightened face of his wife. He and she were alone, alone with the leering, mocking death's-head which sat on the table. Alone in the bowels of the house, deep amid the sub-cellars vaults and corridors, in a prison-room where death stalked in sinister silence.

He put an arm around Carol's shoulders, stared about him, fighting the men-

ace of his own over-wrought nerves. He said harshly, deliberately:

"Easy, pal. Take it easy. It will take more than a locked door to keep us here."

Grimly he paced toward the door on the far side of the room, tried it, found that it, too, locked. He licked his lips, fumbled in his pocket for his pen-knife, passed the flashlight to Carol and motioned her to hold it on the lock.

"We did it before, pal. We can do it again, damn them!"

Crouching, he poked the thin blade of the knife into the rusty slot, went to work impatiently. When he straightened and took the flashlight from Carol's hand, the door was open.

Beyond lay a narrow corridor, extending into darkness.

The flashlight's gleam invaded the passage, disclosed a flight of stairs spiraling upward. Prowling forward, holding tight-hold of Carol's hand, Lane ascended the staircase, using the flashlight to break the darkness ahead. The stairs ended in a tunnelway between high walls, a kind of ramp sloping upward into a central passage.

Lane stopped, realized that the flashlight in his outthrust hand was burning yellow instead of white. He fumbled with it, made it worse. Carol, beside him, said anxiously:

"What—what's wrong?"

"Battery gone."

She shuddered, as if realizing how helpless they would be without any light to guide them. Lane quickened his pace, turned the light on and off at brief intervals to save it. The glow became a feeble yellow circle, then died.

Lane's fingers tightened on the metal cylinder. Feeling his way along the wall, he continued forward, every nerve alert. An unceasing mutter of storm surf was

audible from far below. Then he became conscious of another sound.

He stood rigid, gripped Carol's arm to silence her. Slow footsteps whispered along the corridor toward them. A dark shape, darker than the passage itself, was approaching with sinister slowness, creaking the floor under its weight.

Lane flattened against the wall, stared fixedly. Carol's breath was hot on the flesh of his neck; she put a hand on his belt, and the hand was trembling violently.

Slowly the approaching shape drew near. Lane heard the rustle of the thing's loose garments, thought that he glimpsed a pair of glowing animal-eyes in the dark. He tensed himself, realized that the thing would have to pass within arm's length of them.

Then, abruptly, the whispering footsteps receded into a side-passage and died to silence.

Carol said fearfully: "What—what was it? Oh God, this house!"

Lane relaxed his grip on the flashlight, knew that they had come horribly close to a face-to-face encounter with the specter of the house. He moved forward again, past the mouth of the narrow passage where the unnamed prowler had vanished. Reaching the end of the ramp, he fumbled for a match, held the sputtering stick at face level.

A network of small corridors angled away from him like spokes of a wheel. Grimly he pushed into the nearest one, gripping Carol's hand firmly lest she lose him in the dark.

This house, Fulsom's Folly, had been correctly named. Only a madman with a mania for fantastic creation could have conceived—

He stopped abruptly, stepped once more against the wall, dragged his wife with him. Ahead, a circular eye of light swayed in the dark, moving from side to side as

if endowed with life. Like the burning eye of a Cyclops, the thing pierced the gloom, illuminating floor, walls and ceiling, as it swung in slow semicircles.

There was no escaping it. Lane tensed himself, breathed a word to the girl beside him. The thing was a flashlight, held in the swaying outthrust hand of some sinister prowler. In another instant—

Lane stiffened, opened his eyes wide in amazement as the Cyclops' eye came closer. A voice, a girl's voice, moaned its way along the corridor toward him.

"Jerry! Oh God, Jerry, where are you? I'm afraid to be alone in this awful house! Jerry—"

A stark white face was visible in the flashlight's glow. Staring into it, Lane uttered a low exclamation, strode abruptly forward. The girl saw him, stepped back with a sharp cry of fear. She was Myra Carver.

LANE put a hand on the girl's trembling arm, steadied her. Her colorless face was a mask of terror, tear-stained and haggard. Her hair was a dark brown mop invading her eyes, adding years to her age. If she had been ill before, her condition now was pitiful. Fear had left an indelible mark upon her.

She stared at him, seemed to be struggling to recognize him. Mechanically she shifted her gaze at Carol.

"I—I'm looking for Jerry. Where is he?"

Lane shuddered, had a mental vision of the death-room—that room, somewhere in the labyrinth far below, where Jerry Cassidy's body lay in a bloody heap on the floor and the severed head sat in a lake of carmine on the table. He glanced meaningfully at his wife, afraid that she might blurt out the truth. But Carol said nothing. Her face was nearly as white as the face of Cassidy's girl.

Lane took the flashlight from the fright-

ened girl's hand, forced her gently back against the wall, said deliberately:

"Jerry's all right. There's nothing to worry about."

"But why doesn't he come back. He—he left so long ago—"

"Why did he leave you?"

"To—to find the room upstairs where—" The girl began sobbing again. Lane took hold of her, put a comforting arm around her shoulders. Handing the light to Carol, he said impatiently:

"We've got to get her out of here. Got to find a room somewhere, where she can rest, where we can talk to her."

Carol nodded, paced slowly down the corridor. Doors frowned in the walls on both sides of her. She opened one of them, played the light over the chamber inside. The glow revealed chairs, a table, a worn-out divan with chunks of gray filler swelling from its ripped sides. Lane led the girl forward, lowered her gently, sat in a chair facing her. Carol closed the door, came and stood beside him.

"She's ill, Alan. She ought to be in bed."

Lane nodded curtly, leaned forward and peered into the girl's white face. There would be time for a bed later. Meanwhile, Myra Carver knew something. Her own safety might depend on a revelation of that knowledge.

"When Jerry left you, where was he going?" Lane demanded.

"He—" The girl gazed at him with half-open eyes, rocked her body slowly from side to side. "He was looking for a room upstairs where—where—"

"Yes?"

"Oh, you don't understand! We never should have come. We were mad, both of us!"—

"Tell me about it," Lane suggested softly.

The girl hesitated, stared fearfully. "We—Jerry and I—you see, there was a

house-party at Bob Foster's place, and we were there for the week-end. Bob's place is the big white house about four miles from here, on the Cliff Road. Maybe—maybe you know it." She looked at Carol, and Carol nodded quietly to encourage her.

"Well, there was quite a lot of drinking, and the crowd began talking about this place. Then somebody—I think it was Bob, himself—showed us a piece of paper with the strangest message written on it. He said he found the paper sealed up in a bottle, and the bottle was floating in the surf down on South Beach. It was a medicine bottle of some sort, and—" Again the girl paused, this time as if she had heard something. For a moment she sat motionless, staring straight at the closed door, her eyes wide and unblinking. Then she relaxed.

"The message was—was written in pencil on yellow paper. It said there was a man being held prisoner in a room on the top floor of this house, and it offered a reward to anyone who would come here and help him. Artel Brian, his name was. Well, we all laughed about it and thought it was a hoax, but Bob said it wasn't. He swore he really found it.

"Most all of us by then were beginning to feel our liquor, so we drew lots to see who—who'd be elected to come here—and Jerry and I won. Then we cooked up the story about the accident and—"

This time the girl did hear something. So did Lane and Carol. The sound invaded the room shrilly, stifling the words on Myra Carver's lips. It was a low, mocking laugh, vibrant with evil.

Lane stiffened, sat utterly rigid. Then he lunged erect, snatched the flashlight from Carol's hand and strode savagely to the door. The girl on the divan sat staring. Carol stumbled forward, caught at Lane's arm, tried to drag him back.

"Don't, Alan! Don't!"

He jerked the door open, aimed the flashlight's beam into the corridor. That hellish laugh had been so close that he had heard the sibilant suck of breath which terminated it. But the passage was empty; the shaft of white light ate into a lane of deserted darkness.

Scowling, Lane pushed forward, blind to the need for caution. Carol followed him, kept close to him as he paced half the length of the corridor. Then he stopped, turned a slow circle, made a growling sound in his throat. With a shrug of defeat he slowly retraced his steps, the lowered flash creating a pool of light at his feet.

Not until he reached the door of the room he had just left did he raise the light. Then, still scowling bitterly, he aimed the white beam at the girl on the divan and strode toward her.

He stopped abruptly. His eyes widened. Next moment he was stumbling forward, groaning, and Carol behind him was staring in horror.

Myra Carver was still sitting there, sitting erect as if rigid with terror. But there was something else now. There was a blunt black thing protruding from the girl's breast, and a significant dark stain glowing against the paleness of her white skin. Lane's hand reached out, came away with its fingertips red and wet. He stared into the girl's gaping face, peered fearfully at the protruding black thing.

The thing was a knife handle, with the blade buried in the girl's heart. Myra Carver was dead.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Carol Joins the Missing

FOR an eternity Lane stood without motion, staring fixedly at the bubbling death-wound in the girl's breast. When he turned away at last, his own face was

colorless and his hands twitching violently. He leaned against the wall, peered helpless about the room.

At the far end of the chamber a door hung suggestively open. That door, before, had been shut. Sluggishly Lane paced toward it, stepped over the threshold. The flashlight's exploring eye disclosed a narrow passage extending away into darkness. No sound disturbed the corridor.

Lane turned again, gazed dully at his wife. "That laugh—it was just a ruse to get us out of the room, that's all. Whoever killed the girl came in by this other doorway and—" He shook his head, fighting the uncombatable sense of oppression which had taken hold of him.

"But why?" Carol faltered. "Why should anyone want to kill her?"

"To keep her from talking."

Mechanically Lane walked to the divan, lifted the dead girl in his arms. An odor of hot blood assailed his nostrils, sickened him. Carol reached out, took the flashlight from his hand, and led the way to the door.

Once more, silence had taken possession of the house; the only audible sound was the never-ending mutter of the sea, from far below. Slowly Carol paced along the passage, lighting the way for Lane to follow. The Carver girl was a dead weight in Lane's arms, her head lolling grotesquely toward the floor, thumping against his thighs as he walked.

He thought of the old woman who was somehow so very much like a small child. Thought of Peter Vine, the scowling caretaker, and of Alfred, the mute butler, and of Malcolm Converse, the patient, too-polite master of this house of growing horror. Then he realized the futility of such thoughts, and forced his attention to the problem of the moment—the problem of leaving these whispering vaults of

gloom and returning to the comparative security of the house proper.

How long he followed the slender figure ahead of him, he was not sure. The girl in his arms became a leaden weight, filling his shoulders with a dull, persistent ache. The muffled rumble of the sea, from below, merged with a distant whine of storm wind from the upper reaches of the big structure. Every corridor was like the last one, like the next. The whisper of Carol's slow-moving feet became a sibilant hiss, tormenting his over-wrought nerves.

Then, finally, he recognized his surroundings, realized that Carol had led him into that portion of the house where the old woman had begun her strangely triumphant journey to the death-room. Lights glowed at the end of the passage, where the corridor entered the main section of the house. Someone was slowly approaching.

Carol stopped, stepped back to Lane's side, raised the flashlight in her hand. A sigh of relief left her lips as the light fell upon the approaching shape, identifying it. The shape was Russell Converse, the old woman's son.

Converse was staring. Staring at the limp form in Lane's arms. He peered into Lane's face, said hesitantly:

"Is she—hurt?"

Then he saw the knife-handle protruding from the girl's breast, saw the congealing blood on white flesh. His eyes widened; he stiffened abruptly.

"Good God! What—"

"She's dead," Lane said grimly. "Murdered."

Russell Converse's face lost color. For an instant he stood rigid, one hand half outstretched toward the thing in Lane's arms. Then he regained control of himself, said in a low voice:

"We'd better take her to the living-room. I've been looking for her, wonder-

ing where she went to. This—this is horrible."

He led the way, and Lane followed slowly, grateful for the lights which burned along the corridor's length and made the gloomy vaults and subterranean passage a torment of the past. In the living-room doorway Alfred, the mute butler, stood gaping with wide eyes. Inside, Malcolm Converse rose wearily from the divan, stared, and came forward with rapid strides.

Lane lowered the murdered girl and stepped back, rubbing his shoulders. Quietly he looked into the staring faces around him. Russell Converse said anxiously:

"How did it happen? Good God, this poor girl—"

Lane scowled, wiped bloody hands on his trousers. Deliberately he returned the man's fixed stare.

"Your mother took us downstairs. Jerry Cassidy is down there, murdered. For reasons of her own, your mother locked us in the death-room and left us there."

"My—mother?"

"Your mother," Lane gritted.

**R**USSELL CONVERSE put a trembling hand to his perspiring forehead, rocked heavily on braced legs. He said thickly:

"And this girl? She followed you downstairs."

"She was looking for Cassidy."

"But how—how was she—who is responsible for—"

"The girl was about to tell us something which we evidently weren't supposed to find out," Lane growled. "She was murdered before she could talk."

Russell's face was chalk white, his gaze fixed unblinkingly on the dead girl. He stroked his throat with stiff fingers, made a low moaning sound through tight lips.

"Where—where is my mother now?"

"You know as much about that as I do," Lane said curtly.

Russell nodded, lowered himself into a chair. He stared dully at his father, then again at the limp form on the divan. He seemed unable to think, to act. Seemed exhausted in mind and body, overwhelmed by Lane's grim recital of facts. Then he stood up, said almost inaudibly to Malcolm Converse:

"We must find her."

The father said nothing, merely stood motionless, breathing heavily. He, too, seemed stunned, yet resigned to the inevitable. He looked at the door, took a slow step forward.

He stopped abruptly. From the upper part of the house came a sound, vague and indefinite, which invaded the room and hung for a moment like a living entity in the strained silence. Somewhere upstairs, a woman was laughing shrilly, mockingly, as if hurling forth a childish challenge.

For a ten-second interlude the sound continued, then died abruptly. Russell Converse looked straight at his father; the older man stared back at him. Apparently both knew the meaning of that weird cacophony. For a moment both stood motionless, and the father closed his eyes as if to blot out a hideous mental vision created by the old woman's laughter.

Then, very quietly, Malcolm Converse paced to the door, left the room. His son followed him; and Alfred, the butler, scuffed over the threshold also, as if fearful of being left behind.

Once more, Carol and Lane were alone with Myra Carver.

Lane walked to the door and closed it, returned and leaned wearily against the table. The antique clock on the mantel said three-fifteen; the ticking of the clock was abnormally loud in the

room's silence. Lane lit a cigarette, walked to a window and stood there. The voice of the storm outside seemed less sinister, less vicious.

"It's breaking up," he said grimly. "By daylight we'll be able to leave this damned place."

Carol sat on the arm of a chair, stared at him. "You think the car will start?"

"Not a chance. After we get out of here, we'll find the house this girl was telling us about. Find any house; it doesn't matter, so long as there's a phone. What matters is getting out of here—" He looked at the girl on the divan and shuddered—"and staying out."

Carol said nothing, lowered herself into the chair and sat very still. Weariness had claimed her; she was suffering a reaction from the recent parade of horrors. She closed her eyes, then opened them again as if afraid of falling asleep. Lane, walking away from the window, lit a second cigarette from the butt of his first, and paced the room fretfully.

The hands of the antique clock moved to three-thirty; the clock struck once with a dull whine. Lane ceased his relentless pacing, turned abruptly, stood glaring at the door. Carol said in a low voice:

"What is it? What's wrong, Alan?"

He took a step forward, made fists of his hands. From beyond the barrier came a furtive, scraping sound, as of someone moving slowly along the corridor. Lane turned, said almost inaudibly:

"Stay here. Don't leave this room."

She stared with wide eyes as he moved silently to the door. His hand snaked out, closed over the knob. Abruptly he jerked the barrier open, stepped over the threshold. A crouching figure lunged away from him, stumbled against the opposite wall of the corridor.

LANE made a snarling sound, leaped forward. The crouching figure darted away from him, ran jerkily down the passage like a huge rat scurrying to safety. Lane recognized it, hurled himself after it. The fleeing shape was Alfred, the mute butler.

The man was fast, abnormally so. His short legs carried him rapidly down the corridor to the foot of the winding staircase. Frantically he clawed his way up the stairs, gripping the bannister with an outflung hand. Lane took the stairs three at a time, overhauled the man in the darkness of the upper hall. His hooked fingers dragged the butler back, spun him around. Savagely he flung the man against the wall, pinned him there.

"Well, what's the idea?"

Alfred gaped at him with big eyes, said nothing.

"So you won't talk. You can't, eh? Well, you'll come back downstairs, mister, and if that dumbness of yours is faked—"

Lane stiffened, choked on his own words. From the living-room below came a sound of terror which struck fear to his heart, brought cold sweat to his forehead. The sound was his own name, flung from terrified lips. Again and again it shrilled through the house, wailing its way to where he stood. His own name, flung from the agonized lips of his wife.

Desperately he lunged backward, releasing the butler, forgetting the man completely. The upper hall seemed endless as he raced along it. His feet beat a wild tattoo on the stairs. Long before he reached the doorway of the downstairs room, the shrill screams were silenced, leaving a hellish emptiness in their wake.

Lane's face was a mask of sweat as he stumbled over the threshold. Then he stood rigid, staring. A liquid sob welled from his lips, moaned its way through the room.

The chamber was empty. Carol was gone.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Lane Meets the Killer

LANE took three steps forward, stopped again and stood swaying while the blood ebbed slowly from his face. His eyes widened until they were rimmed with stark, staring white. His whole body began trembling, refused to be still.

Carol was gone. The grim reality of that fact ate into him, numbed him, stifled his power to think. The emptiness of the room was a mockery, leering at him, taunting him. A full minute passed before he regained control of himself. Then, blindly and bitterly, he cursed himself for having left his wife alone.

No sound disturbed the silence of the big house as he turned and strode back to the door. His own thoughts revolved endlessly in his brain, seeking something to fasten to. He groaned aloud with a realization of his own helplessness.

Carol was gone. Gone where? Below, in the gloomy vaults and passages which networked the sunken cellars of the huge house, lay innumerable hiding-places where her unnamed captor might have taken her. Above, in the upper reaches of the building, lay similar rooms, similar chambers of torment. And with every passing moment, every instant wasted in indecision, the chances of finding her were lessened.

Lane stood stricken, strove desperately to think clearly, to decide on a course of action. Then a sound reached him from the top of the winding staircase. He strode forward, saw Alfred, the butler, standing motionless at the head of the curved bannister, staring down at him. And another sound, that same peal of hellishly triumphant laughter, came from

somewhere beyond, somewhere in the upper part of the house, jangling its way down through rooms and corridors to stab into him, spike his heart with renewed fear.

Blindly, Lane stormed up the stairs, toward the man who stood there. The butler recoiled from him, stepped backward with a quick, jerky movement, staring with wide eyes. Lane's lips curled viciously; his hand clamped down on the man's shoulder.

"Where's my wife? What happened to her?"

Alfred said nothing, merely shook his head sideways, worked his lips soundlessly. Lane's hands whipped up, curled around the man's thin neck.

"Damn you, talk to me! Where's my wife?"

The butler shook his head violently, clawed feebly at the fingers that held him. No man with a voice could have refrained from crying out under such pressure. The fact that Alfred was silent, despite his terror, was proof enough that his affliction was genuine. Lane released him, said desperately:

"Listen. Can you take me to where she is? Can you?"

Alfred shook his head, stepped slowly backward, gaping with wide eyes. The man was afraid, too afraid to be of any assistance. Lane groaned, turned away, stiffened suddenly with the memory of the mocking laughter which had come from above.

That laughter might have meant anything, nothing. But there was no other lead to follow, nothing else to cling to. Fists clenched, Lane strode down the corridor, broke into a run as he realized the value of every passing instant.

The corridor ended in darkness, in a series of smaller passages which angled away like threads of a spider-web. Lane fumbled for a flashlight, found none,

again cursed himself for being careless. Blinely he stumbled into the maze, felt his way forward with outstretched hands. Alternately running and walking, he continued into the very heart of the black labyrinth, came to a flight of stairs. The stairs had no end, carried him endlessly upward.

He was aware, then, that the house was no longer silent—that he had penetrated to an upper part of the building where the whine of the wind outside was like a human voice. The sound whispered its way through the walls on all sides of him, seemed like a detached entity, parading with him through the dark. He stopped, formed his wife's name with his lips, then abandoned it, realizing that silence was safer.

What was it that the dead girl, Myra Carver, had said about this part of the house? There was a room up here, somewhere, where a man was held prisoner? A room where—

He caught himself, dragged his stumbling feet to an abrupt halt. Ahead of him, far down the narrow corridor along which he was prowling, a light glowed in the dark. A chuckling sound, vibrant with malice and triumph, came like a ghost-voice through the soughing whine of the storm outside.

THE light advanced as he stared at it. It was a flashlight, held crookedly in the hand of someone short, stumpy of stature. Lane took a step forward, narrowed his eyes as he guessed the identity of the bearer. Then his eyes widened again, continued to widen, as the approaching shape took form. Abruptly he flattened against the wall, stared unblinkingly, amazed by the thing that met his gaze.

The advancing shape was Nora Converse, and the old woman's child-like body was bent almost double under the weight

of another shape which lay limp across her stooped shoulders. In the pale back-glare of the flashlight, that combination of shapes loomed like a grotesque, inhuman monster as it moved slowly along the passage toward Lane's rigid body.

The old woman—the woman whose shrivelled form had seemed so impotent, so empty of strength, so childishly inadequate—was pacing forward, without staggering, under the dead weight of an unconscious shape almost twice her own size. Her hooked arm clutched a pair of slender, dangling legs. Over her shoulder hung the limp body of Lane's wife!

For a moment Lane's amazement numbed him; he did nothing but stare as the flashlight's glowing eye came toward him. Then he realized that his search was over, that he had found the thing he was looking for. Abruptly he stepped from the shadows of the wall, lunged forward with a guttural exclamation growling from his lips.

The woman stopped, stood rigid. Her face stiffened in the dull glare of the light. She made a hissing sound with her lips, glared at Lane with smouldering eyes as he strode into the flashlight's livid beam.

The limp thing in the old woman's arms stirred, then, as Lane strode forward, the girl's eyes twitched open, focused on Lane's lunging body. For an instant they were full of bewilderment, then their expression changed to fear and they stared not at Lane, but at something behind him.

At the same moment, the flashlight's glare died an abrupt death, plunging the corridor into darkness. A scream of warning shrilled from Carol's lips. A low snarl of triumph came from Nora Converse as she jerked backward.

Behind Lane, the floor of the passage creaked ominously under the weight of heavy feet. Absolute darkness, made doubly intense by the former glare of

the flashlight, hung like a winding-sheet over the corridor. Lane stood rigid, aware that he was in danger. Blindly he thrust out both hands to protect himself.

Steel fingers came out of nowhere, clawing at him. He stumbled backward, lashed out with a clenched fist, felt the fist strike home against heaving flesh. Next instant the thing was upon him, grinding him into the wall, dragging him into its murderous embrace. Hot breath seared his face, choking him. Powerful arms snaked about him, sent a cruel agony through his chest as he strove desperately to writhe clear.

In the dark, he could see no single part of the vicious thing which sought to drag him down. The thing was a specter, doubly hellish because it lacked shape, lacked features. Yet it possessed the strength of a giant, had arms that were like steel cables, fought with the savage, silent fury of a hungry animal.

For a sudden short interval, terror caught at Lane's heart; cold dread took possession of him. He was facing death, knew it. His assailant was the same murdering monster which had exterminated Cassidy, killed Cassidy's girl. He cursed the darkness which blinded him to the thing's identity, cursed his own eyes because they lacked the power to penetrate that damnable pall of pitch.

Then a cold, sudden desperation drove the terror from his heart, gave him a new lease on life. He dragged air into his lungs, used his entire hundred-eighty pounds of bone and muscle in a lunging charge which drove the monster back. Farther down the corridor, Carol was screaming in the dark; the old woman was mumbling guttural words of triumph.

Lane fought blindly, battered down the arms which sought to encircle him. His knotted fist buried itself in hot flesh; a grunt of satisfaction left his lips as the nameless monster released a shrill cry of

agony. Then the thing was upon him again, snarling viciously. The thing's flowing garments made a swishing sound in the dark, slapped against Lane's up-thrust hands. A leg shot between Lane's knees. A sweeping arm crashed against him, hurling him off balance. He stumbled, went down.

Even before the floor stopped his fall, the monster leaped headlong, grinding him down. Hooked fingers sank into Lane's corded neck, inflicting pain so intense that his mouth jerked open, releasing a groan. He strove desperately to reach up, tear the strangling hands aside; and the effort rocked him off balance, left him open to further attack.

One more he knew the meaning of terror, realized that he had no defense against the hellish strength of his assailant. Cruel hands stopped the breath in his throat; a great weight bore him down, crushed him into the floor. Above his upturned face hung the snarling face of the fiend who was intent on murdering him—and that snarling countenance was no face at all, merely a pair of glowing eyes burning in a black void.

The eyes came nearer, seemed alive in themselves, like twin lanterns smouldering in the dark. Hot breath, sickly sweet as if tainted with cheap perfume, hissed into Lane's mouth and nostrils, gagging him. He had a sudden horrible dread of death, felt himself on the verge of annihilation. Instinct alone made him strike out in a last desperate effort to break the monster's grip.

The effort was half successful. Writhing clear of the fiend's weight, Lane rocked to his knees, tried frantically to grope erect. He was vaguely aware of the sound of his wife's voice, sobbing hysterically, in the nearby darkness. Vaguely aware that the old woman was still mumbling eagerly, as if giving instructions to the devil of darkness who

sought to commit murder. Half erect, Lane swung on bent legs, aimed a weary fist at the snarling thing which leaped toward him.

The fist missed its mark. Powerful hands closed over Lane's stumbling body, dragging him into the monster's embrace. He sucked a deep breath, beat a frantic tattoo against the thing's face and chest, felt himself being lifted clear of the floor. Next moment he was swung into space, raised in a sickening arc above the monster's crouching bulk. A scream jangled from his lips. The powerful arms flung him with hellish force through the dark. The wall of the corridor crashed into him.

Even before his broken body fell to the floor, he was unconscious.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Another Head

FOR an interlude of twenty seconds, absolute silence reigned in the passage, as the nameless monster bent above Lane's motionless body, peering down with twin orbs of triumph which burned like cat-eyes in the dark. Then, straightening abruptly, the thing moved rapidly down the corridor, its loose garments flapping grotesquely with each gliding stride.

An instant later, when a sudden streamer of white light split the darkness, the corridor was empty except for the limp, lifeless shape which lay against the wall.

It was Nora Converse who paced forward, holding the flashlight in an out-thrust hand. Behind her, in the shadows of the passage, lay the inert form of Carol Lane; and the old woman, abandoning it, advanced with perky steps and peered down at the work done by the murderous fiend who had vanished in darkness.

Triumph blazed in the woman's narrowed eyes. Stooping, she ran a probing hand over Lane's body, curled her lips

in a crooked smile. In a sing-song voice she said mockingly:

"Well, ain't that lovely now? The nice young man won't never do any more lovin' of his pretty darlin'. And him so young, too—and so handsome!"

Quietly she straightened again, stepped back. Leaving Lane where he lay, she returned to Carol's unconscious form, stooped, and lifted the girl from the floor. Still smiling crookedly, she turned her head for a last look at the lifeless form near the wall, then paced slowly down the corridor in the direction taken by the fleeing monster.

The muffled scream of the storm, and the sibilant whisper of her own shoes on the uncarpeted floor, accompanied the old woman as she prowled down the passage. With no display of haste, she paced deeper and deeper into the maze of narrow corridors mumbling to herself in a low voice as she stumbled occasionally under the dead weight of her burden. Carol Lane had fainted, was still unconscious.

The flashlight's glare swept the darkness ahead, lighting the way for the old woman as she advanced. Once, entering a narrow passage which ended far ahead in a blank wall, she stood motionless a moment and aimed the light at a flight of steep steps which terminated in a closed door. On those same steps, Jerry Cassidy had met death; and as Nora Converse stared at the barrier, she made a mumbling sound in her throat and wrinkled her parchment face in a scowl of bitterness. Then she turned away, paced down a side-passage, descended a winding staircase, and thrust open a door on the lower level.

The flashlight's eye, penetrating the gloom of the chamber beyond, revealed a carpeted floor, rose-papered wall, table, chairs and bed. Scuffing forward, the woman lowered her burden to the bed,

then paced to the table and held a sputtering match to the wick of the oil-lamp which stood there. A warm yellow glow filled the room, cast out the sinister pits of shadow. Nora Converse returned to the door, closed it quietly, walked eagerly to the bed and sat there, peering down into the upturned, colorless face of Carol Lane.

For a long while the girl's eyes remained closed. Leaning closer, the old woman stared into her features, reached out a thin hand to caress the smooth flesh. Soft, whispering sounds came from the woman's lips, murmured gently through the room. As if fascinated by the girl's loveliness, she allowed her hands to move over Carol's limp body, touching face, throat, hair. Aloud she said plaintively:

"You're so pretty. So sweet and pretty—"

HER wandering hands caressed the girl's shoulders, tore the thin fabric of Carol's dress, baring the white flesh beneath. The very whiteness of that flesh put hunger in the old woman's eyes, made her bend even closer. A transformation took place in her. A snarl of envy curled her lips; hate smouldered in her narrowed eyes. She said sibilantly, harshly:

"And why can't I be like you? Answer me that! Why do I have to be so homely and—"

Carol's eyes twitched open, stared up into the woman's hovering countenance. For an instant the girl seemed bewildered, confused; then, with a sudden cry of fear, attempted to sit up.

Lean hands pushed her down again, held her on the bed. Glaring at her, the old woman snarled viciously: "So you don't want me near you, hey? I'm not good enough for you, maybe. I'm too ugly for you. Well, you're here and you'll stay here! See?"

Terrified, the girl looked into those

angry features, cringed from them. With trembling fingers she covered the nakedness of her shoulders, only to have the woman reach out and uncover them again. A low, liquid moan welled from Carol's lips; she closed her eyes, rolled sideways. The woman's powerful hands dragged her back, held her in a vise-like grip.

"Well, what are you afraid of? I'm not goin' to hurt you! Can't I look at you if I want to?"

"Oh God," Carol moaned, "let me go! Let me go back to Alan!"

"And what for? He's dead, ain't he? He—"

The woman stopped talking, turned with a quick, revolving movement which crumpled the bedclothes beneath her. The door of the room was open; the woman's gaze fixed itself unblinkingly on the tall, straight figure which stood there on the threshold. How long he had been standing there, she did not know. But he paced forward now with slow steps, peering at her as if unable to understand what was going on.

The old woman stiffened defiantly. "Well, what do you want?"

The intruder stopped, stood on wide-spread legs, shoved both hands into the pockets of his smock. He was Russell Converse, the woman's son. He peered at the girl on the bed, at his mother, scowled and said curtly:

"What are you doing?"

"I'm keepin' the young lady company. Is there anythin' wrong with that?"

"I think there is, mother."

"Well, there ain't, so you don't need to worry!" Nora Converse thrust her head forward, made a face at him. "We were gettin' along perfectly all right until you busted in."

Russell strode forward, looked down into the terrified face of Carol Lane. A silent message lay in the girl's eyes—a message of supplication, begging him to

take her from the old woman's clutches. He scowled knowingly, stared at the girl's bare shoulders.

"Where is your husband?"

Carol shuddered, shook her head heavily. The old woman said in a shrill voice: "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Where is he?"

"He ain't here."

"Very well—". Russell put both hands on the woman's shoulders and drew her aside, ignoring her furious efforts to resist. "I'll take this girl downstairs, where she will be more comfortable."

"She's comfortable enough here!" the woman screamed. "You leave her alone!"

Russell leaned forward, gathered Carol in his arms. Like an infuriated child the woman clawed at him, beat at him with clenched fists, hammering a wild tattoo on his arms and back. There was strength in those blows, strength enough to make the son clench his teeth against the pain.

Step by step the woman followed him to the door, heaping abuses upon him, clutching at the girl in his arms. Her parchment face was livid, her shrivelled body a leaping, lunging, animal-like thing which sought to block the doorway. Long after he had thrust her aside and paraded over the threshold, she stood clutching the sides of the door-frame, screaming lurid threats after him.

"You'll pay for this, Russell Converse! I'll show you! I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do! I'll go upstairs and—"

Without looking back, Russell strode rapidly down the unlighted corridor, licking his lips as the woman's shrill threats rang in his ears. The girl in his arms said nothing; once more her over-wrought nerves had yielded to the shock of the ordeal. Her eyes were closed, her head lolling. Only the soft sigh of her breath gave indication that she was still living.

WHEN the girl opened her eyes again, the man who carried her was pacing quietly along a dark passage somewhere in the bowels of the big house. She moved wearily in his arms, uttered a low sob which caused him to peer down at her. Almost inaudibly she said:

"Where—where are you taking me?"

"To my own room," he said gently, "where my mother will not annoy you."

"But I want to go to Alan! Oh God—"

"Please don't worry. I'll find Alan and bring him to you."

He turned into a side-passage, strode forward at the same even pace, as if he knew every turn, every twist of the maze, and had no dread of the Stygian darkness. A moment later he stopped, thrust open a door at the end of the corridor, paced quietly over the threshold into the chamber beyond. His groping fingers found a light-switch. A dull click echoed in the dark, and the room was suddenly warm with a diffused glow.

It was a well furnished room, large but intimate, with low-hanging ceiling, carpeted floor, dark-toned walls. Heavy curtains masked the twin windows, and a hanging portiere concealed what was apparently a doorway leading to an adjoining chamber. Russell Converse strode forward, past the square mahogany table in the center, and lowered his burden to the divan which stood beyond. Quietly he stepped back, said in a low voice:

"I must apologize for my mother's conduct. She is not herself. She doesn't realize—"

Carol stared at him, stared wearily around the room.

"You—you said you would find Alan—"

He nodded, stepped quietly backward. "You don't mind being left alone?"

"No. Oh God, no—if only you'll find him and bring him here!"

Russell paced quickly across the room,

put a hand on the door-knob, said reassuringly: "I sha'n't be long." The door closed behind him. There was a dull click, as of a key turning in the lock. Then a sound of footsteps receding along the corridor outside.

Carol sat up slowly, put her feet on the floor, stared with wide eyes at the closed barrier. Her pale face became even whiter, seemed drained of every trace of color, as she groped erect and moved forward. It was an effort to stand up, to walk. The parade of horrors of the past half hour had sapped the strength from her slender body, thinned the blood in her veins. Dizziness caught at her as she paced across the carpet. She clutched the table to steady herself, then stifled the terror in her heart and stepped forward again.

Timidly she put a hand on the door-knob, turned it slowly, afraid to convince herself that her suspicions were correct. They were. The door was locked.

She stepped away from it, stood motionless, stared fearfully at the threatening wall of wood. For a moment she was a victim of unreasoning terror, blind dread; then the power to think returned to her.

The door was locked. Russell Converse had locked it. But not to keep her here, not to make a prisoner of her. He had locked it to protect her, to keep out the vicious old woman who might discover her whereabouts and seek to do her harm. That was the only plausible explanation. There could be no other reason!

But suspicion still clawed at the girl's mind as she turned away and surveyed the room. Anxiously she looked around her, stared at the room's furnishings, at the glowing chandelier which hung above the table. A muffled wail of storm wind was audible beyond the walls, beyond the windows; and from far below came a distant mutter of surf pounding against

the base of the cliff. Fearfully, Carol walked to one of the windows, drew aside the heavy curtains, looked out.

The darkness out there seemed less intense now, less oppressive. In a little while the night would be over, a murky gray of dawn-light would invade the big house, dispelling some of its terrors. Then, unless she and Alan were actually prisoners in this manse of gloom, they could go out into a normal world again, leave the horrors of the night behind them.

She and Alan. She stiffened, put a clutching hand to her breast as she remembered. She took a step forward, said aloud in a thick voice:

"Oh God— Alan—"

She would have fallen if the wall had not held her erect. Leaning there, she sobbed convulsively, tried in vain to fight the feeling of awful loneliness which swept over her. Salt tears coursed down her face, dampened her lips. Her staring eyes remained wide open, as if gazing again at the hideous thing which had happened in the upstairs corridor. A long while passed before she found strength enough to move away from the wall.

**S**LLOWLY, then, she paced toward the heavy portières on the opposite side of the room. Curiosity was not the force which spurred her forward; rather it was a vague desire to do something, to drive out of her mind the awful despair which lurked there. Mechanically she pushed the portières aside, stepped through the narrow doorway into the adjoining chamber.

The room was small, square, softly illuminated by light from the doorway. A narrow table, apparently a work-bench, occupied one end; other tables stood in the shadowed corners. Advancing slowly, Carol studied the chamber's contents

indifferently, realized that the place was obviously a studio.

Then she stood motionless, took a genuine interest in her surroundings. Staring at her from the smaller tables about the room were faces, strangely lifelike faces which sent a shudder through her. Cautiously she approached one of them, reached out a timid hand to touch it. Her fingers encountered cold clay.

Dead clay . . . yet the artist who had designed those features was a master craftsman! They seemed endowed with life. The uncanny realism of them sent an icy shock through Carol's hand. She drew the hand away abruptly, as if it had touched human flesh.

Trembling, she peered at the other tables, at the clay busts which sat upon them. Those faces, too, were terribly lifelike, seemed to be furtively watching her, gloating at her uneasiness. One of them was somehow familiar, strangely like something she had seen before. It glared at her with sightless eyes, deep, leering eyes sunk in a leprous white mask, hideously real and violently hideous—as if its maker had taken pride in creating the essence of horror.

That face, that same gruesome countenance, had glared at her once before, through a black aperture in the wall of the room where she and Alan had been imprisoned, a very long time ago. Someone—someone with a twisted sense of humor—had held the hideous clay thing in the dark aperture. Gaslight and wavering shadows had done the rest.

Fascinated, Carol turned a slow circle, studied each of the shadowed shapes, realized vaguely that there were many of them. Mechanically she moved toward the long table at the far end of the room.

The strangely human lumps of clay, surrounding her, had a strange power over her, made her forget her own mental

agony and the menace of the locked door in the other room. Her gaze roved about the chamber, seeking out every detail. Then, with a sudden low exclamation she shrank back, put a trembling hand to her mouth to stifle a cry of fear.

On the long table confronting her sat two heads which were *not* fashioned of clay—two leering gargoyles which were hellishly familiar. For a moment she closed her eyes, swayed blindly on unsteady legs. But fascination dragged her forward to examine the hideous things more closely.

Like living heads in a sideshow of freaks, the two heads sat on the table-top, returning her stare. Dark red stains marred the smooth boards beneath them. Beside them loomed a significant pile of unmoulded clay, obviously placed there in preparation for a task not yet begun.

But the work *had* been begun! Already the upper portion of one of the severed heads was covered with a thin layer of gray clay—soft, pliable clay which had been moulded with expert fingers to fit the contour of the dead flesh beneath! Like a living head wearing a skull-cap, the thing sat there, its dead eyes wide open, its features twisted in a mocking leer.

Once before, Carol Lane had looked into those dead features, had cringed in horror at sight of them. On that occasion, the severed head had squatted on a table in a death-room deep in the cellar of the house. Now it was here, in Russell Converse's "studio," undergoing a fiendish transformation which would conceal its identity under applied layers of cold clay.

It was the head of Jerry Cassidy. And the second death-head, squatting beside it on the table-top, was that of Cassidy's girl—the girl who, less than an hour ago, had been lying dead in the living-room, downstairs.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## The Monster

TREMBLING violently, Carol stared into the dead faces and uttered a low cry of terror. Her eyes remained wide open, refused to close. She put a groping hand to her throat, fought against the numbing sense of fear which sought to overwhelm her. Mechanically she stepped backward, retreated slowly, stiffly from the table.

Behind her, the threshold of the room creaked under the weight of a silent intruder. Carol stiffened, felt the muscles of her slender body go taut. Like an automaton she turned. In the doorway, facing her, stood the broad-shouldered form of Russell Converse.

A sob of relief left Carol's lips. She took a step forward, stopped again, realized that something about the old woman's son was not the same as it had been. He was scowling, glaring at her with unblinking eyes. His lips were curled back over exposed teeth.

She cringed from him, wanted suddenly to whirl and run. The man's eyes were twin tubes of malice, boring into her. A harsh growling sound came from his throat as he paced slowly forward.

"So you have discovered my secret. You are just a woman after all, with a woman's fatal curiosity!"

The words were acid, snarled through trembling lips. Stumbling backward, Carol collided with the table, shuddered as one of the propped-up heads rocked on its pedestal of flesh. Grimly, deliberately, the old woman's son advanced upon her.

"Just a woman, prying into affairs that don't concern you. You are all the same, all of you! Cassidy came here to find out what lives in the room up there in the loft. His curiosity resulted in his death, and in the death of the girl who came

here with him. Both of them knew too much. And now—you know too much!"

The man's eyes blazed, burned like pits of red flame in the half-light of the room. Staring into those eyes, Carol knew that she had been mistaken. She had trusted him, believed him to be the only normal person in this hell-house of strange human beings. Now she knew that he was like the others, worse than the others. Gazing fearfully into those smouldering orbs, she saw madness in them, realized that they were the eyes of a maniac.

Cold fingers clutched at her, froze the blood in her veins. Frantically she staggered back, sought to escape. With awful slowness he strode toward her, his curled hands extended to drag her into his embrace.

A lurid scream shrilled from her lips, tocsinned wildly through the death-chamber. Terror alone gave her the strength to lunge away from him, to run. Like a frightened deer she avoided him, clawed her way to the opposite side of the table. Still he advanced, keeping his big body between her and the door.

With strength born of desperation, she upended the heavy table into his legs, raced around it as he stumbled back with a vicious curse. The two death-heads thudded to the floor, rolled grotesquely over the carpet, tangled themselves in the madman's feet as he leaped toward her. He tripped, sprawled sideways into the outstuck legs of the table, caught himself with an outflung hand. Sobbing thickly, Carol stumbled toward the door.

He was almost upon her as she fled across the threshold. The hiss of his breathing was like the spitting of an enraged animal behind her. Blinely she raced into the adjoining room, careened into the big table, pitched headlong with the impact. Her flying feet beat a tattoo across the floor, toward the door which led to the corridor.

The door was closed. Even before she reached it, Carol knew that it spelled death. Locked or not, it would resist her efforts long enough for the snarling beast behind her to fall upon her, drag her back into the room. Abruptly she turned, leaped in another direction. Her slender body crashed into the wall, rebounded. Her groping hand came in contact with something small, hard.

The thing was a light-switch, and she pressed it instinctively, at the very moment when the madman's contorted bulk came hurtling toward her. Savage hands clutched at her dress, tore the fabric as she wrenched free. In the dark she staggered blindly along the wall, turned on stiff legs, ran back to the table.

FOR a moment the darkness saved her, gave her time to fight back the terror which had commanded her every action. Motionless against the table, she stood staring, realized that the monster could not locate her. Furious snarling sounds came from the black void near the door, as Converse thrashed about in the dark, endeavoring to lay hands on her. Then the sounds ceased, the room was utterly silent. A vague, ill-defined shape, which was the madman's menacing body, stood rigid near the wall, its smouldering eyes hanging like bloody lanterns in the dark.

At that moment, Carol knew the identity of the prowling monster who had terrorized Malcolm Converse's house of macabre mystery. Those burning eyes, the bulging black shape beneath them, were hellishly familiar. She had seen them before, had cringed from them in horror. Now she knew the truth, knew that Russell Converse himself was the nameless fiend who had murdered Cassidy and Cassidy's girl. The vile thing before her, searching the darkness in a vicious attempt to discover her whereabouts, was the same hideous monster who had over-

powered Alan, in the corridor upstairs.

Even as the truth drove home to her, the madman moved. Slowly, cunningly he paced forward, between her and the door. Those burning eyes fastened on her with an evil hunger.

But they did not reach her. Before the menacing shape had covered half the intervening distance, a sound from the corridor outside invaded the room, caused the monster to stand motionless. Behind him, the door opened with a dismal creak. A shaft of white light, emanating from the eye of a flashlight, swept the room, came to rest on Converse's looming body.

Behind the flashlight stood the child-like form of the mistress of the house—the thin, shrivelled shape of Nora Converse.

Carol stared at that shrivelled shape, and shuddered. The old woman's face was a mask of vile triumph, eyes narrowed, mouth curled in a hideous grin. She advanced slowly, glared at Converse, said in a cracked voice:

"Well, why don't you turn on a light? Afraid of me, are you?"

Converse said nothing, merely gaped at her. His madness seemed to have fallen from him like a discarded cloak. He cringed as the woman strode to the light-switch in the wall. A burst of shrill laughter jangled from her lips as she turned the lights on and whirled again to confront him.

"If you're not afraid, you'd better be!" she cackled, waving the flashlight as if it were a bludgeon. "I told you not to cross me, Russell Converse! I told you what would happen if you took that girl away from me! Well—it's happened!"

The man's face went white; his eyes bulged in their sockets. He took a step backward, said fearfully:

"What—what have you done?"

"What have I done? I've let your lovely brother loose, that's what! He's loose

—do you hear? And he's coming down here to pay you a visit!" Again the woman laughed with savage mirth, hugely enjoying her triumph. "Well, why don't you say something? Can't you talk?"

"You devil!" Converse rasped. "You black-souled devil! I'll—" His hands opened and closed convulsively. He moved toward her, snarling in his throat. But his fear was greater than his rage. He stopped again as the old woman retreated to the doorway.

Standing there, she taunted him with a leering grin, hurled words of denunciation at him, labelled him with vicious epithets which sapped the color from the face of the girl who was listening. Then, jerking her head around, the woman peered into the darkness of the corridor, said shrilly:

"Why don't you run away? He's coming for you! Can't you hear him? Do you think he's coming here to make *love* to you, after you've tormented him all these years? Run, you fool! *Run!*"

Converse stood rooted to the floor, seemed unable to put his big body in motion. With enormous eyes he watched the doorway, oblivious to everything except the sounds which were audible in the corridor outside. Hearing those sounds, the woman stepped away from the aperture, flattened against the wall. Neither she nor her son seemed aware of Carol's presence in the room.

THE sounds in the corridor came nearer, grew louder with each passing moment. They were strange sounds, as of some ponderous body slithering slowly along the dark passage, clawing its way forward with great effort. Icy hands clutched at Carol's heart as she heard them. Terrified, she stared at Russell Converse, realized that he was more afraid than she.

Then with a gurgling cry Carol stumbled backward, staring at the doorway.

Across the threshold came a thing that spiked her soul with horror, left her utterly rigid, paralyzed with fear.

The thing was stark naked, leprous white, gleaming with sweat. Short stumpy legs carried it forward, supported its malformed body. Not more than four feet high, it swayed heavily with every step, rolled its tremendous shoulders as if in danger of falling. Those shoulders, growing out of a thin, twisted torso, were hideously out of proportion, horribly massive and powerful. Long, hairy arms dangled from them, terminating in gaunt hands which curled forward as if alive in themselves.

The thing stopped, stood swaying, glared at Russell Converse. Gaping at it, Carol realized that it was human—a son of the old woman who crouched near the wall. Its huge head stabbed forward; its features were malformed and shapeless, yet somehow similar to the features of the old woman. Little wonder this deformed beast had been kept prisoner in the room upstairs!

The gargoyle face was full of hate, hunger. Gazing into it, Russell Converse retreated step by step, his groping hands clawing the table as he fell back. The thing followed him in grim silence, uttering no sound, paying no attention at all to Carol or the old woman. Cunningly, viciously it advanced, lumbering forward on its blunt mockeries of legs.

The far wall of the room ended Russell's retreat. Wide-eyed, he flattened against it, stood rigid. Escape was impossible; between him and the door loomed the menacing bulk of his strange adversary. A bubbling sob came from the terrified man's lips. He mumbled words of supplication, jerked his arms up in front of him to keep the killer at bay.

"Go back, Artel! Back! My God, I've never done anything to you! I've never harmed you! Go back!"

The thing paid no attention. Its huge head rolled from side to side; its hairy hands reached out. Step by step it closed the gap, stalking its victim as a monstrous cat might stalk a helpless rodent. Russell cringed into the wall, moaned thickly through dry lips. The terror in his face increased, reached the bursting point.

With a mad cry of fear he lunged sideways, made a desperate attempt to escape the hairy hands that reached out for him. The effort failed. One of those hideous arms lashed out with snake-like quickness, dragged him into the killer's embrace. Next moment Russell Converse was fighting frantically for his life.

He had no chance. Strong as he was, that obscenely shaped body was stronger. The long arms lashed around him, encircled him as the legs of a bloated spider might have encircled the squirming body of a captured fly. Hurling him to the floor, the monstrous thing fell upon him, tore at him with hooked fingers. Under the weight of that half-human pile of flesh, the doomed man writhed in helpless agony.

Lurid screams jangled from his tortured throat, filling the room with their clamor. Incoherent words whined from his lips, begging mercy. But if the thing heard, it paid no attention. Its mind, if it had a mind, was centered on one purpose only: to mutilate the heaving body of its victim, to tear that writhing flesh, beat that screaming face to bloody pulp.

Near the door, the old woman looked on with hungry eyes, made muttering sounds in her throat. She, the woman who was responsible for the very existence of the blood-mad monster, was glorying in its hellish triumph, revelling in the awful sounds which filled the room. Near the wall, Carol Lane looked on in horror, unable to close her eyes against the thing that was happening.

Then it ended. The deformed monster

flung itself squarely upon the helpless form beneath it. Hairy hands found Russell's throat, imbedded themselves in torn flesh. The hooked fingers dug deep, wrenched sideways. Red blood bubbled from the dying man's mutilated neck, stained the murderer's hands carmine, formed a gleaming pool on the carpet. The victim's last scream ended in a gurgling whisper.

**T**HE killer rocked backward, glared down into Russell's face. Slowly it groped erect, stood swaying on its abbreviated legs, uttered a snarl of triumph. Then it turned, glared momentarily at Carol and the old woman, and lumbered along the wall to the nearest of the two windows.

The hairy hands reached out, dragged aside the heavy curtains which masked the aperture. Outside, the darkness of night had yielded to a gray murk of dawn; the muffled scream of the storm was no longer a voice of fury.

Leaning forward, the killer thrust the ancient window up in its grooves, then leaned far out over the sill and peered down. Swirling snow invaded the room, driven by a whining wind. From below came the roar of the sea, beating sullenly against the base of the cliff.

Turning, the creature named Artel waddled quickly back to the mutilated shape which lay on the carpet. The long arms reached down, gathered that bloody form in a cruel embrace, swung it aloft. With the same lumbering gait, the killer returned to the window, flung the dead body upon the sill, heaved it over. Then, for a long while, the creature leaned there in the aperture, staring triumphantly down at the sea below. A full minute passed before the naked shape straightened, before the huge hands clawed the window back into place.

Once more the sound of the storm was

muffled, the room was silent. Slowly, cunningly, Artel turned to stare at the two women.

There was no malice in the monster's attitude as he peered from Carol to the old woman and back again. Like a curious animal he studied the girl a moment, then turned and lumbered slowly toward the door. But he did not reach it. Nora Converse, stepping forward from the wall, pointed a crooked finger at Carol and said in a shrill voice:

"Wait a minute! Before you go upstairs, I want the girl. Bring her to my room, Artel."

The monstrosity stopped, stared at the woman intently, as if bewildered by her command. Again he turned to look at Carol, and again the woman said shrilly:

"Bring her to my room, I told you!"

The creature shrugged his huge shoulders, waddled sluggishly toward his intended victim. With a low cry of terror, Carol retreated from his advancing bulk, screamed at him to stop.

He did stop, and glared at her sullenly, as if angered by her fear of him. The old woman's curt command spurred him forward again. A snarl twisted his gargoyle countenance as he lumbered across the floor, past the table.

There was no escape. Just as Russell Converse had done before her, Carol flattened against the far wall, stood utterly rigid, paralyzed by the cold dread which swept over her. She was aware vaguely that someone was approaching along the corridor outside, that the old woman was peering into the passage. But those things were nothing. The hairy, outstretched hands of the monster were the focal point of her attention.

Then, suddenly, she looked beyond the menacing shape which threatened her. Her eyes went wide. She uttered an incoherent cry, stumbled sideways as the groping paws curled toward her. There,

in the doorway, stood a battered, dishevelled figure whose presence filled her with hope, caused her to stare with amazement.

That figure, framed against the darkness of the corridor beyond, was lean and tall, with blocked shoulders, a mop of tangled hair, a face smeared with congealed blood.

The intruder was Alan Lane.

A shrill cry leaped from the girl's lips as she stumbled forward. In her eagerness, she forgot the hideous shape in front of her, forgot what the murderous monster had already done to Russell Converse. She had eyes for one thing only—for the man who had come back to her from the dead.

Lane stood staring at her as she groped toward him. Nora Converse, crouching near the doorway, gaped at him as if seeing a ghost. Incoherent words mumbled from the old woman's mouth. Fearfully she stepped backward, as Lane paced into the room.

Then Lane stopped, flung out a hoarse cry of warning. Hairy hands clutched at Carol's slender body as the monster lunged toward her with uncanny quickness. The girl screamed, made a desperate attempt to wrench herself free. Staring into the gargoyle face of her assailant, she beat frantically at the leprous flesh of his malformed chest.

Over the thing's shoulder, she saw Lane hurtling toward her, realized that he intended to drag the monster away from her. Cold terror stifled the scream of warning in her throat. Then she saw something else.

Behind Lane, a second shape loomed in the doorway. It was the squat, thick-shouldered form of Peter Vine, the caretaker, and Vine's outthrust hand gripped a gleaming revolver. Even as the murdering monster released her and swung savagely upon Lane, the caretaker strode forward.

The hairy arms encircled Lane's middle, caught him in a crushing embrace. Savagely he fought to free himself, drove a pile-driver fist into the killer's vile face, hammered at the thing's obscene body. Then Peter Vine stopped, took deliberate aim. The room trembled to the sudden deafening roar of the revolver. The monster stiffened, uttered a lurid scream of agony.

For ten seconds, the deformed son of Nora Converse swayed drunkenly, clawed with hooked fingers at his shattered chest. Then he rocked backward, crashed into the wall, fell in a grotesque heap to the floor.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *The Storm Passes*

CAROL LANE knew nothing after that. Her over-wrought nerves gave way, mercifully relieved her of watching the monster's death agonies. She would have fallen, had not Alan put a protecting arm around her, holding her erect.

She was not aware that Malcolm Converse entered the room a moment later, stared first at the dead thing on the floor, then at his wife, and said slowly, heavily, to Lane:

"I was afraid this would happen. Thank God you and your wife were not harmed."

Long later, when Carol regained consciousness, she was lying on the divan in the living-room, downstairs. The room was pale with daylight; the sinister darkness of the night was a thing of the past. Beside the divan stood Lane; and facing him, in one of the big overstuffed chairs, sat Malcolm Converse, slumped in the chair's depths as if utterly exhausted, sick in mind and body.

"Now it is finished," Converse was saying. "And God help me, I am glad of

it. For years, this has been a house of evil. Now it can be closed up."

He stared at Lane out of bloodshot eyes. The events of the night had added ten years to his age, put a note of dead despair in his voice, transformed his face to a colorless mask.

"It has been a house of madness," he said wearily. "The man who built it was mad, and from the very beginning this house has possessed a soul of its own—a wicked soul, full of malice. My wife is a direct descendant of the builder; insanity is in her blood. She possessed the mind of a wicked, scheming child."

"I suspected her," Lane said grimly, "of being the murderer."

Converse shook his head. "You were wrong. She is malicious, yes, and terribly strong despite her apparent frailty, but she is mentally only a child. It was she who attempted to frighten you and your wife when you first retired. She meant no harm—then. After she obtained the—the gargoyle from Russell's studio, and terrorized you with it, she came to me and told me about it, with childish pride in her ingenuity.

"This house is hers. She ruled it. She took immense delight in terrorizing the occasional strangers who came here. Only when those strangers were lovely women, as in the case of your wife, did she become insanely jealous."

Lane glanced down at his wife, saw that she was awake. Quietly he sat beside her, took one of her hands in his. Converse, paying no attention, continued in that same lifeless voice, as if talking to himself.

"Alfred, the butler, knows very little of what has been going on. Lately he has been suspicious. I have seen it in his eyes. He has watched our every movement. Peter Vine knows everything, but until tonight he kept his knowledge to himself. He owes me a debt of gratitude—"

"And I owe him one," Lane nodded. "When your lovely son, Russell, left me for dead in the corridor upstairs, it was Vine who found me, lugged me to a place of safety, and patched me up. Then I talked to him, convinced him that he had to help me. He took me to Russell's room. Got me there just in time."

"And he killed Artel." Converse leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, breathing slowly, heavily. "God forgive me, but I am glad he did it. Artel was not my son; he was my wife's son by a former marriage. Since the day of his birth he has been kept in that small room at the top of the house. Only once before has he escaped, and then he nearly killed me before I succeeded in locking him up again. Day after day, Russell went to that room and tormented him. They hated each other."

Lane scowled, said in a low voice: "When I first met Russell, I thought him the only normal person in the house."

"At times he was. When there were no strangers in the house, he was as normal as you or I. But the presence of strangers excited him, made him return to that vile studio of his. You have seen the horrible things in that room. Some of them are clay, some are—" Converse shuddered, put a trembling hand to his perspiring forehead. "I knew about it, but what could I do? He was my own son. If only Cassidy had remained in his room last night, instead of prowling about the house in the dark, the night might have passed in peace and quiet. Oh God, why did he go to that part of the house? Why?"

"He and his girl," Lane scowled, "had a note, written by the deformed creature in the prison room. At least, that's what Myra Carver claimed. She said the note was found sealed in a medicine bottle, floating on a beach near here. Evidently it was written by Artel, describing the

location of his prison room, and begging the finder to come here and release him."

CONVERSE shook his head wearily. "Artel could never have written such a note. He could not write. The girl was lying." He turned in his chair, stared at the doorway behind him, as heavy footsteps were audible in the corridor outside. A sigh of relief left his lips as the intruder proved to be Peter Vine. "No, Artel could not have written any such note. Cassidy and the girl must have come here for some other reason."

Peter Vine paced forward, said quietly: "You're mistaken." Fumbling in his pocket, he produced a folded sheet of yellow paper, dropped it in the older man's lap. "I found that in Russell's studio. It's your wife's handwriting."

Converse unfolded the paper, stared at it with wide eyes.

"But why—"

"Just another one of your wife's childish schemes," Vine growled. "I've just come from her room. She's up there, crying like a baby because things didn't work out just the way she wanted them to. She admits writing this thing. Says she was tired of having nothing happen in this damned house, and she wanted some excitement. I've locked her in her room now, and after she's through bawling, she'll probably fall asleep."

Converse crumpled the paper in his fingers, let it fall to the floor. In a heavy, lifeless voice he said:

"It is over now. All over. You and Alfred had better go, before the police come here. There is no need for you to be implicated; you have done nothing. It is enough for my wife and me to be here when the police arrive."

He turned wearily to Lane. "You, too, must leave before the police come, otherwise you and your wife will be dragged into a recital of horror of which you are

entirely innocent. The storm is over; you can get back to your car in safety, or reach some house where there will be a telephone. I wish to be alone."

Lane looked at his wife, realized that the older man's advice was good. Already, Peter Vine had paced silently from the room, disappeared down the corridor in the direction of the servants' quarters. Lane stood up, stared into the pale face of the unhappy man before him.

"There is nothing we can do before we go?"

"Nothing," Converse said. "I wish to be alone."

Lane nodded, paced silently into the hall to the antique clothes-tree which loomed there. Returning, he helped Carol into her coat, hunched himself into his own. When he turned again to look at Malcolm Converse, the man was slumped deep in the overstuffed chair, his eyes closed, his hands folded in his lap.

Quietly, Lane put a hand on his wife's arm, drew her to the door. Together they walked down the long corridor, opened the heavy door which led to the outside. A moment later the barrier thudded shut behind them; they began the long tramp back to the stranded car.

Behind them as they walked away, the door of the house opened again, closed noisily. They turned, stood motionless a moment, staring. Peter Vine, the caretaker, and Alfred, the butler, descended the steps and ploughed across the snow-covered lawn in the opposite direction, Vine carrying a battered suitcase.

Lane gazed silently at the huge structure, held his wife close as she trembled against him. Bleak and desolate, the strange house loomed above a dreary expanse of shadowed snow, its owlish windows staring out over the surrounding wilderness.

Somewhere in the upper portion of that massive structure, in a room with a locked door, sat the little old woman whose shrill laughter had so often wailed through the sinister maze of black rooms and corridors—the little old woman whose childish scheming had plunged the dwellers of the house into a nightmare of horror from which they had never risen.

In the living-room downstairs, silently awaiting the arrival of the police, sat the unfortunate man who had tried in vain to keep those fearful horrors from the knowledge of outsiders.

Dark and forbidding, the huge house loomed there in its pall of gloom, with but two living persons left in its grim labyrinth of rooms.

The horror was ended. The old house was a grim, silent mausoleum, and would soon be closed, abandoned, left to its fate.

A shudder shook Lane's tired body as he turned away. Once more he took Carol's arm, led her along the deserted road. When he spoke at last, it was to say with forced indifference:

"Well, I hope your new husband is enough of a mechanic to get the old bus started."

THE END

... NEXT MONTH ...

### HANDS THAT KILL

A Mystery-Terror Novelette by James A. Goldthwaite

On All Newsstands April 9th



# WHEN THE RATS FED

by William B. Rainey

*Author of "Whispering Death"*

*A girl's piercing scream drew Byron Kent to that inner room where the blind old man, the giant idiot and the cursing crone sat in ghoulish glee—as the rats fed!*

**B**YRON KENT, leaving behind him the swamp in which he had lost his way, walked a half mile before twilight thickened into a dull, bleak grayness. His dog Lobo, an Irish setter, followed at his heels. They had just crossed a field of broom straw, when Kent saw a fringe of pine trees reared black against the sky, and beyond the pines a house. At first he could see nothing except the outline of the place and the light burning behind a window on the right.

Kent's face was lean and sunburned, with level black eyes and a wide, pleasant mouth. He wore khaki hunting trousers, a flannel shirt unbuttoned at the collar, and a leather jacket. On his left side hung a stained hunting bag con-

Amos Sewell

taining a half dozen partridges. He carried a shotgun in the crotch of his left elbow.

He passed through the fringe of pines and stopped at the edge of the weedy, unkempt yard. The house was square, two-storied, with tall columns, a type often found in the South. The walls and the columns were gray and weather-beaten. The left corner of the building sagged. The windows, without curtains or blinds, stared like sightless eyes. The steps had long since rotted away and loose planks had been put across the braces.

For a moment Byron Kent hesitated. There was something unnatural, something sinister and evil about this place, about the utter, motionless silence that closed it in. Far off to his left he heard the dismal notes of a whippoorwill. "The bird of death," he thought, and smiled crookedly.

It was then, before he had even stepped into the yard, that he noticed the smell. Something touched his leg and he looked down to see Lobo, the setter. The dog was standing with his head low and forward, his tail erect. Kent reached down to pat him and the dog began to growl softly.

"I don't blame you, fellow," Kent said. "I don't like that stink either. We won't stay *here* tonight."

Kent wrinkled his nose, tried to locate the odor. It was a sickening mingling of smells. "Like a dead rat in a keg of whisky," he muttered, half aloud. The dog growled again, bristling the hair along his back. Far off beyond the fringe of pine trees the whippoorwill whistled.

Kent looked at the dull light behind the window, and decided only to ask how to reach the main road. It would be better to walk all night than to stay at this place. There was something more than the odor that he didn't like here—some-

thing that he could almost feel in the air.

He started toward the house, the dog close beside him.

The planks that formed the steps to the front porch were loose and made hollow, thudding sounds under Kent's boots. Some of the braces had rotted away and he had to step carefully. The flooring of the porch was rotting, but still firm. He stepped on it, and looked up.

The light in the front room had gone out.

Kent stood flat-footed, staring at the dark, blank window. He had heard no sound, no movement. It was strange that the light had gone out. There couldn't be many visitors at this place, and country people in the South were usually hospitable.

The soft padding of Lobo's feet sounded on the rotting steps. Then the dog rubbed against Kent's leg, growling. Kent shifted the shotgun in the crotch of his left arm, walked across the porch and stopped before the open door. Beyond, a pitch-dark hallway gaped like an empty tunnel. He raised his right hand and knocked. In the deep stillness the knocking sounded amazingly loud. Echoes rumbled along the dark hallway and faded.

Kent dropped his hand to Lobo's collar, and stood waiting. The dog growled, then pushed close against Kent's leg. The odor was heavier here, sickening, oppressive. Kent shrugged his shoulders, against the odor and against the chill in the night air. An unbroken quiet thickened with the darkness.

Abruptly the dog snarled, lunged toward the door. Kent's fingers tightened about Lobo's collar, jerked him back. The man's eyes peered into the darkness of the hallway, and went suddenly round and cold with fear.

Two bright balls of green fire glowed upward from the floor.

KENT staggered, dropping the gun from the crotch of his arm to catch the balance with his left hand. Subconsciously his right hand clung to Lobo's collar.

The green fire balls swam closer. Kent saw a shadow move in the darkness behind them, heard a hiss and snarl. Lobo lunged again and Kent, seeing what it was now, jerked him back, laughing harshly, nervously.

"By God! That cat scared me," he said, and his voice sounded hollow.

The cat was almost at the doorway now, its tawny body a blurred shadow. Kent stared at it, amazed. It was nearly a foot high, almost as big as a bobcat. Its body was fat, bloated, and it moved with a rolling, lazy motion. The dog was struggling against his collar, snarling.

"Down, Boy. Down," Kent said.

For a moment the cat stood staring at them with green, round eyes. Then it turned, without a sound, and vanished. Lobo growled once more, but quit struggling.

The muscles in Kent's shoulders felt cold and jittery. "Lord!" he said. "I never saw such a place." He took his hand from Lobo's collar and struck the door sill. The sound boomed.

"There ain't nobody there, stranger."

Kent spun in his tracks, his hand still raised. The man who had called to him was a darker spot against the gloom of the yard.

"Oh, hello," said Kent. He paused, added, "I saw a light in here a few minutes ago. It just went out."

The man in the deep gloom answered: "There ain't nobody there." His voice was flat, final, as if these were the only words he knew, and the answer to all questions.

Kent shrugged. He went across the porch, down the rotting steps and across the yard. The man did not move or

speak. He was dressed in overalls and a blue shirt. A stubbly beard covered his face, and small, close-set eyes peered from under the matted hair which fell across his forehead. He held a shotgun in the crotch of his right arm, muzzle down.

Kent peered through the gloom. "I was hunting," he said, "and got lost. Came out of that swamp on the wrong side. How can I get back to Tuscaloosa without going through the swamp again?"

"Huntin' huh?" the man grunted.

Kent grinned. "Birds, too. Not liquor, though I could use a drink." He stuck his hand in his hunting bag, pulled out a dead partridge, dropped it back into the bag. "Those folks in there must have thought I was a prohibition agent."

The man's little eyes shifted toward the house, then back to Kent.

"There ain't nobody there," he said.

"All right," Kent answered. "How do I get to Tuscaloosa?"

The man swung the muzzle of his shotgun northward. "Keep goin' thetaway 'bout two mile and you'll find a road. Follow—"

A wild, terrified, choking scream split the darkness! The cry came from the house, and it rose high, shrill, in one long ghastly note! But the man's voice broke only for a second.

"Follow thet road 'bout a half mile to yore right," he kept saying. His voice was louder now, harsh against the scream. "You'll run into another road what'll take you to the main one." The cry had suddenly stopped, and the man's last words had been louder than necessary.

Byron Kent had whirled to face the house, gripping his shotgun with both hands. His wide mouth had jerked hard. He stood tense, head thrust forward.

"There ain't nobody there," the man repeated. "Jest that damn cat."

Kent started toward the house.

"That was a woman," he said, without stopping or turning his head.

He had one foot on the bottom step when the countryman spoke, "Don't go no further, mister. Unless you wanna get shot in the back."

**K**ENT stopped, his foot still on the step, and turned. The man had tucked the butt of his shotgun under his right armpit; the muzzle centered on Kent's head.

Kent took his foot off the steps. He carried his own gun in his right hand, holding it by the barrel, and walked back toward the countryman.

"Now get on toward Tuscaloosa," the man said. "We ain't lookin' for no trouble round here."

Kent stopped, less than a yard from the muzzle of the other's gun. "All right," he answered. "I'm going. Which way did you say?"

"Thetaway." The man waved his gun muzzle northward.

Byron Kent swung the butt of his own gun with a twist of his wrist, slammed it down hard on the man's toe. The man cried out in surprise and pain; and swiftly Kent swung his left foot forward, his shoulder coming inside the muzzle of the other's gun; then brought his left fist up from the hip. It landed flush on the man's jaw, knocking him over. Kent dropped his own gun, caught the countryman's with his right hand, and twisted.

The man hit the ground in a sitting position. He snarled like a dog, lunged toward Kent's legs. Kent slapped the butt of the gun against his head, hard. The man rolled over, made a gurgling sound, and went limp.

Lobo sprang, but Kent pushed the dog aside. "Down!" he said. "Be still."

He broke the shotgun, put the shells in his pocket, dropped the gun. After

picking up his own, he patted the man's pockets, found nothing, and turned to the house.

The hallway was a tunnel of darkness. At the far end Kent could see the heavy gray of the night, but inside he could make out neither walls nor floor. Lobo crouched close against his side, growling at the silence.

Kent stepped over the sill, the shotgun in his left hand. His shoes made soft, thudding noises on the flooring. Lobo's feet were a damp whisper behind him. Kent took three steps down the hallway, and stopped, listening. Two more steps and total darkness had wrapped itself around him.

Then he saw the eyes again, near the far end of the hall, big and green. Lobo barked once, sharply. Kent grabbed for the dog, touched his tail as he flew past. There was a rushed tapping of padded feet, the cat's snarl; then the green eyes vanished. Kent saw two streaks of darkness as cat and dog hurtled from the other end of the hall into the night.

The abrupt ending of all sound made the quiet seem heavy and pregnant. Kent stood flat-footed, head forward, muscles taut. Then there was sound again. . . .

It was a squeaking sound, sharp and tiny, almost like the cry of a cricket. Another cry answered it, and another — small, shrill, squealing sounds that seemed to come from underneath Kent's feet, from close to the floor up and down the whole length of the hallway. Then little claws scraped on wood, and the cries became more numerous until the whole house was alive with tiny, high-pitched, whispered screams.

Byron Kent did not move when he saw the gimlet-pointed, red eyes peering at him from the floor, ten feet away. His own eyes had grown big and round in the darkness and he was breathing through his mouth in long gasps.

Then he saw more points of red flame, hundreds of them, and knew that the house was alive with rats.

The scream burst out again, close on Kent's right! He spun half around. The red eyes of the rats seemed to shut, and disappear. Nothing but blackness now. The scream died away.

From where it had sounded, there was a rush of approaching footsteps. Kent stepped back a pace, stopped. Something struck him full in the chest, staggering him. He flung up his right hand, clutched as small fists pounded wildly against his face and shoulders. He heard the torn sobbing of breath and knew that he held a woman in his arms. Then suddenly she went limp.

"There's a stranger in the hall. Light the lamps." The words shook through the darkness with the cracked sound of an old man's voice, but in them, too, was a full, confident, domineering note.

Kent held the woman against him with his right arm. She had ceased to struggle though she had not fainted. He could hear her heavy breathing, and her lips working, making soft, wordless moans. To his right he heard the scrape of heavy shoes. There was the rubbing of a match and a blue spurt of flame. Then yellow light fell through an open door on Kent's right, making a soft rectangle in the blackness of the hall.

**B**YRON KENT looked at the girl in his arms, and gasped. Her hair was yellow as lamplight, and long. It fell in disheveled curling masses about a pale, ghostly face and over slender shoulders. Kent could not tell the color of her eyes but they were large, and dulled with the shadow of insanity. Her face was oval, her mouth bow-shaped and soft, but the whole face was a picture of tired horror.

"Ann, get back to your chair." It was the same voice which had ordered lights.

The girl's lips continued to move, mak-

ing gibbering half syllables. She pushed away from Kent, went through the open door. Her dress was torn, but made of expensive material and stylishly cut. Kent followed her to the doorway and stopped. She went to a chair near the right wall and sat down. At the floor near her feet were two dead rats, one on top the other.

Kent's eyes went jerkily around the room. His face was bloodless and his lips twisted. His left hand still gripped his shotgun and the fingers of his right hand clinched and unclenched. The room was dimly lighted, and at first his eyes took in but one object at a time.

Directly across the room from the door an old man sat in a wheel chair. Thin white hair clung to his scalp. His face was a mass of wrinkles and dirt. His teeth had rotted away and his lips sagged back into a hollow, shadowed by a long, hooked nose. His eyelashes were abnormally long and white; and his eyes also were white, fixed motionless, and blind.

A tall, bleak, hard-faced woman stood directly behind the wheel chair. "What's he look like, Martha?" the old man asked her.

"He's one of them Tuscaloosa fellows," she answered. Her voice was flat, toneless, without emotion. "You better kill the s--- -----, now that he's here."

"Maybe," the old man said. He put his thin, bony hands on the arms of his chair, stared with white, sightless eyes toward Kent.

Kent shifted his double-barreled shotgun to his right hand, let his eyes, now grown accustomed to the dimness, take in the rest of the room. On the far side, beyond the old man and to Kent's right, was a large fireplace. Near it, in a straight wooden chair, sat a bearded, square-faced countryman. He was dressed and built like the man Kent had knocked out in the front yard.

Beyond were two barrels. Liquor, Kent

guessed from the odor. So they believed him a prohibition officer. . . .

Kent's eyes swept over the barrels, and stopped. In the shadows near the right wall a giant of a man crouched on the floor. White, shaggy hair fell about a blank, idiotic face. In huge maul-like hands the giant held a golden-haired doll, rocking it, and crooning in a voice high pitched and shrill. Kent looked at him, and shuddered.

"You better kill that s--- ----," the woman said.

Kent looked at her, then at the old man's blind eyes. "I don't give a damn about your liquor running," he said huskily. "I got lost hunting; that's what I'm doing here. But I'm not leaving until I find out about that girl." He nodded his head toward the one who had run into him. "She doesn't belong here."

The woman kept looking at the old man. Her voice was toneless. "You better kill the s--- ----, Mister."

The old man stared with sightless eyes at Kent, but he did not speak.

Abruptly the girl began to scream. She shrieked high, flat notes, one after another. Kent jerked around. She was sitting in her chair, feet flat on the floor, eyes staring straight ahead. She kept screaming, cry after cry.

Beyond her Kent saw the giant. He had left his doll, was crawling silently along the floor near the wall on hands and knees. His eyes had grown suddenly bright; his lips were pulled back; his breathing rapid but silent. Suddenly he stabbed out his hand, slapped it down at the corner of wall and floor.

Kent heard the sharp cry of a rat. The giant held the vermin in one hand, stared at it with bright eyes. His lips had curled into a smile and he was breathing loudly now. With one push of his thumb he broke the animal's neck. He started crawling toward the girl, carrying the rat.

She sat without moving, leaning forward in her chair, screaming. Her mouth stayed half open and the cries broke from it, high pitched, flat and monotonous.

Kent took one step toward the girl, his face ghastly.

"Tommy!" the old man said. The giant froze, the rat still in his hand. He had almost reached the girl. Kent stopped, and the girl suddenly became quiet.

"Go back to your doll," the old man ordered.

The giant's face clouded like that of a sulky child. He put the rat on the floor, turned and crawled back to his corner.

**T**HE old man had never moved. His face was still fixed on the spot where Kent stood in the door. "There ain't no need of thinkin' Tommy would hurt Ann," he said. "He thinks she's another doll."

The muscles in Kent's face were working and his chest felt hollow. He had ceased to notice the odor, but a sickness stirred in his belly. The muscles in his left hand ached from his grip on the shotgun.

"Tommy'll have to do without her," he said. "She doesn't belong here. I'm taking her away. I'll find who she is in Tuscaloosa."

The woman said again, "You better kill the s--- ----, Mister. He's gonna cause trouble."

"Shut up, Martha," Mister said.

Kent heard the sound of heavy shoes on the rickety front steps. He moved backward, put his shoulders against the wall, and half turned so as to see the door, the old man, and the countryman near the fireplace. The steps shuffled down the hallway, growing louder. Inside the room there was no movement.

Then the man Kent had knocked down came through the door. He shuffled in, his eyes on the floor, his hands twitching,

fear written large in his face. There was a bump over his right ear.

Kent held his shotgun in both hands, muzzle toward the newcomer.

"There ain't nobody here, huh?" he said.

The countryman looked at Kent, then back toward the floor at the old man's feet. His mouth twitched and his cheekbones showed in dark lines across his face. His voice cracked with fear as he said: "I tried to stop him, Mister. I tried to stop him. He hit me with his gun. I—"

The old man had never moved. His lined, dirty face was utterly impassive. "I told you to send him away," he said.

"I tried! He hit me with his gun. I—"

"He's got that gun now, Ed," the old man crackled.

The fear in Ed's face grew to stark terror. His breath came in long gasps. Kent could scarcely hear the words when he said, "Yas, sir."

The wrinkled, dirty face, the white sightless eyes never changed, as the lips said: "Take it away from him."

Ed's breathing was a husky noise. He raised terror-stricken eyes to the passive face in the wheel chair, moved them slowly toward Byron Kent.

Color seeped into Kent's gray face and his lips began to smile at the prospect of action.

"You or anybody else try to take this gun," he said softly, "and I'll blow your damn head off."

Ed stood midway between Kent and Mister. The stubble of beard showed gruesomely black against the bloodless skin of his face. His loud breathing filled the room with its only sound. His eyes wavered, white and fearful, between the blank, unmoving face of the old man and the muzzle of Kent's gun. His breathing grew more rapid, louder, straining toward a breaking point.

Mister's cracked voice said, "Take that gun, Ed."

Ed shifted his weight slowly onto the foot next Kent. Large beads of sweat had broken out on his forehead and cheeks, showing plainly between the stubble of beard. His face turned toward Kent. Kent's finger curved around the trigger.

Ed leaned his weight forward, prepared to dive. He saw Kent's trigger-finger tighten. He stopped. He whirled suddenly and leaped toward the motionless old man.

Kent did not see a muscle flex in Mister's face or hands; yet Ed, almost on him, stopped suddenly. He yelled once, a wild cry of fear and agony, and pawing at his face pitched sideways to the floor! The sound of his writhing arms and legs was a flailing drumbeat that ceased abruptly. Then Ed lay without moving and Byron Kent saw that his face was a ghastly purple.

The grim smile on Kent's face had frozen. His hands were cold and clammy about the gun and his heart beat loudly in his breast. As if from a distance he heard the cackling voice of the old man: "Mac, you and Tommy get that gun."

There was no hesitation now. The countryman and the giant swept across the room in one headlong rush. Kent's frozen muscles moved slowly but he got the gun around. He saw the countryman's bearded face a yard away, and squeezed the trigger. The recoil drove the gun butt back against the wall. The explosion shook the room like thunder. The man's face suddenly went black, then showed a mangled pool of blood and bone.

Kent tried to dodge as the second man came in, but stumbled against the wall. He saw the sweep of the giant's hand, the glint of lamplight on the golden hair of the doll. Then lights burst and whirled before his eyes—and utter blackness followed.

**D**ARKNESS stirred with darker creatures. Tiny lights showed here and there, revolving slowly through a swimming mist. From far off came dull meaningless sounds . . . high pitched, monotonous beating sounds.

Byron knew that his eyes were open, had been open for more than a minute before they began to focus and consciousness returned to his brain. He tried to wipe one hand across his eyes, over his throbbing head, but the hand wouldn't move. He tried again, harder this time, and abruptly he knew that his hands were tied behind him.

He shut his eyes and held them shut, even against the high monotonous sounds that beat through the mist. When he opened them again, the mist was gone and he could see, could smell once more the rotting, sour, sickening odor.

He was lying in the middle of the floor where he had fallen. Both hands and ankles were tied. There was a puddle of blood near his face and a smeared stream of it ran down past his feet and out of sight.

The girl, Ann, sat leaning forward in her chair, her face white, her eyes blank and fixed straight ahead, her mouth half open. And from her mouth ripped scream after scream, never varying in tone or pitch. Her whole body was rigid, and the cries came mechanically, endlessly.

Kent twisted his head and saw the old man. His head was slightly forward and turned as if to listen better to the girl's cries, and he was smiling. Behind him stood Martha, looking at Kent. Both were nearer the fireplace than formerly, and crouched on the floor beside them was Tommy, the idiot. He had the smashed head of the doll in his hands, rocking it and moaning. The bodies of the two dead men were gone.

Then Kent saw the rat. Only its head was out of the hole where earlier Tommy

had caught one with his bare hands. Its head was raised high, its whiskers twitching, its eyes bloodshot. There was something horrible, something fascinating about the rat and Kent stared at it with cold, paralyzed muscles.

The rat moved until its entire, eight inch body was out of the hole, then stopped. Behind it Kent saw another head appear. And then he heard the squeaking of innumerable shrill, tiny voices.

Byron Kent jerked his wide, swollen eyes away from the rat. He rolled over, his mouth wide, his face gray and bloodless while his eyes went jumping in horror around the corner of floor and wall.

There were a dozen rat holes in the room and in every one of them showed a black, loathsome head, red eyes, and little lips twitching back from pointed needle-sharp teeth. . . .

The girl kept screaming, high, flat, endlessly.

The rats moved further into the room . . . their long, hairless tails sweeping, their black whiskers twitching at the smell of blood. And Byron Kent realized then that he lay in the pool of blood made by the man he had shot. There were dead partridges in the hunting bag at his side. His clothes were stained with blood. Those, giant, starved rats would be on him in another minute, gnawing at the blood spots in his clothing, eating through. . . .

Insanely he fought at the ropes around his hands and feet, writhing, cursing, snarling. The rats scampered back to their holes in terror and stood there, bodies hidden in the dark, red eyes glowing. But the exertion soon tired his weakened body. And when his strength was gone and he lay gasping, the rats came from their holes again and started across the floor toward him.

Weakly he rolled to face the other direction. The girl had not moved. The

cries ripped endlessly from her throat.

Through horror-widened eyes Kent saw the old man. His bony hands were folded on the arms of his chair and his face was lighted by an almost beatific smile. His lips were working over toothless gums.

"She's crazy, Martha," he said. "At last she's crazy. It's been twenty years since her pa made Tommy insane, but I ain't forgot, Martha. Tommy was just a little boy then. Remember, Martha? A little boy. And he was sick and her pa was operatin' on him. . . ." He laughed, a cackling laugh. "Listen at her! She's crazy."

"Yas, she's crazy," the woman said. "You got yore revenge. Now you better kill the s--- on the floor. . . ."

THE girl kept screaming, high and flat, and through it all Byron Kent could hear the hungry squealing of the rats, the tiny scraping of claws on wood. He fought for control of himself, rolled on his back and swept his eyes around the room.

The floor near the walls was black with a hundred rats and more were crowding out from every hole. They would be coming in upon him soon again. And his struggles would be useless. Was there no way of escape from this sickening, awful fate? . . .

It was at that second that Kent's mind went coldly deliberate, though the muscles of his body kept twitching. . . .

The biggest puddle of the already clotting blood was near his face, and a dark stream showed where the body had been dragged from the room. Beside the door was Kent's shotgun.

Kent wriggled so that his hands came close to the puddle of blood, began to rub the ropes that bound his wrists in the puddle. The woman watched him blankly. Mister kept smiling and listening to the

girl's screams, hoarse now. The giant sat with the broken doll in his hands, moaning.

Kent twisted again, moving his head as far as possible from the puddle of blood, and began to rub his ankles and the ropes about them in the blood. The woman, looking at him, said, "You better kill the s--- . . . ."

Mister's bony hands tightened on the arms of his wheel chair. The smile showed like a light through the grime and wrinkles of his face.

"She's crazy, Martha," he whispered. "At last she's crazy. Twenty years, and her pa thought I'd forgot."

A rat was less than a foot from Kent's face. He could see the twitching of its lips and whiskers, the sharp white teeth. Kent lay motionless.

Something twitched at his ankles, then at his waist. He rolled his head to look down his body. The floor was a black mass of swarming, snarling rats. One black giant stood on Kent's belly, gnawing at the bloody hunting bag, making sharp, squealing sounds. His ankles were covered. And then sharp pain flicked through his right wrist and he knew that small teeth had dug into his flesh.

Consciousness remained with Byron Kent but dimly. He lay on his side, holding his head from the floor, waving it and cursing in short, hollow, flat-toned words. Twice he felt himself writhing, kicking, shouting, and felt the tiny claws of rats across his face. Then he would fight himself to lie still again, holding his head from the floor. He strained at the ropes, felt them give slightly, hold again.

Sharply then, he heard Lobo bark, heard the patter of feet on the back porch! He began to kick, shouting, "Lobo! Lobo!" The ropes gave around his wrists and he leaned forward, tore at the ones about his ankles.

"Kill the s---!" the woman screamed.

"Tommy!" the old man crackled.

Tommy leapt from his crouch, bounded forward across the room. Kent snapped the ropes from his ankles, slipped to one side to avoid the rush of the giant. At the same second Lobo and the great cat whirled with a flying, snarling mass of rats into the room. The girl's screams went shrill again, fiercer.

The giant crashed past Kent, whirled to leap at him again. Rats squealed and smashed under his feet. Kent leaped, caught the shotgun. Tommy was almost upon him as he spun about with the gun coming up. Blindly he pulled the trigger. The giant's face seemed to disappear behind the charge of bird shot. He keeled over backward. Kent saw the woman rush past him and out the door.

Something struck the wall beside him with a small, plunking sound. He leaped for the girl, caught her up in his arms. Lobo crashed with a mad whirl against the old man's wheel chair, flinging it over. Kent saw the man's head strike the corner of the fireplace, saw the sudden rush of blood cover his cheek.

From the old man's toothless mouth fell an inch-long tube. Byron Kent looked at the wall where he had stood a moment before. He saw what it was that had struck there, and now he knew how the

man Ed had died. A tiny poisoned dart shot from the miniature blowgun in the old man's mouth. . . .

With the girl in his arms, Kent stumbled into the hallway, out the front door and down the sagging steps. Even just outside the house, the air seemed fresh and clean by comparison with what he had left behind. He breathed deeply, stood erect.

Lobo had followed him out and was at his feet, waiting. Kent released the girl and she stood alone. She was no longer screaming.

He turned, took a few steps toward the house, then stopped. Let the woman Martha do what she would with the shambles; he had had enough of this. He turned back toward the girl. She stood, very still and pale in the thin moonlight, waiting for him to come to her. Her eyes seemed saner now.

Kent stood clinching and unclenching his fist, looking at the girl's pallid, lovely face. He didn't know much about madness, but he knew that the kind not hereditary and brought on by fear could be cured. Standing there, he swore it would be.

He took the girl's hand in his, held it tightly. Side by side, and with Lobo following close behind, they started down the road together, toward Tuscaloosa. Kent still held her hand tightly in his own.

THE END

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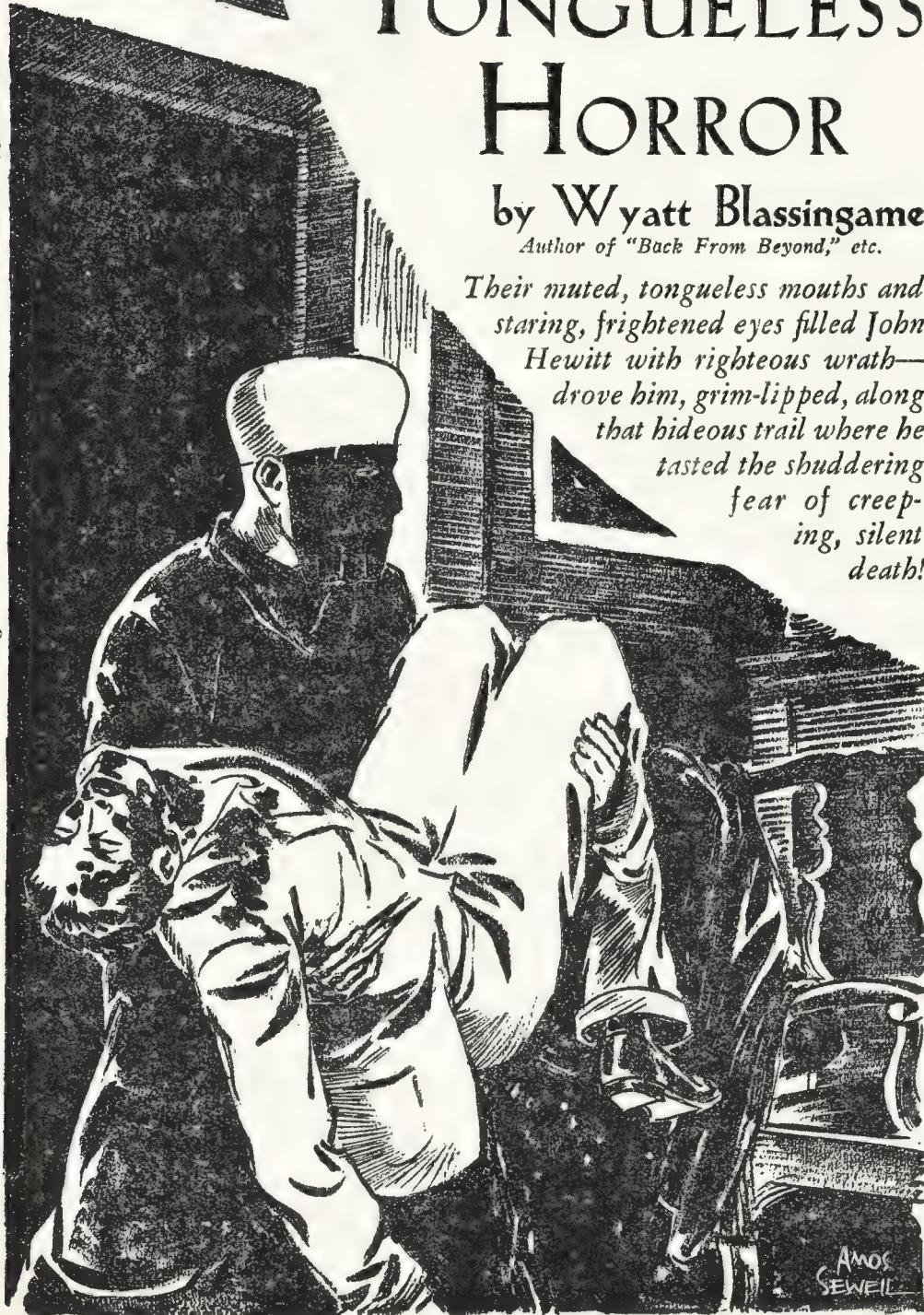
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# THE TONGUELESS HORROR

by Wyatt Blassingame

*Author of "Back From Beyond," etc.*

*Their muted, tongueless mouths and  
staring, frightened eyes filled John  
Hewitt with righteous wrath—  
drove him, grim-lipped, along  
that hideous trail where he  
tasted the shuddering  
fear of creep-  
ing, silent  
death!*



COMPLETE  
HORROR-MYSTERY  
NOVELETTE

JOHN HEWITT stepped from the door of the Little Italy cafe and stood flat-footed on the sidewalk before it, facing into the wind. Cold gripped the drab houses along First Avenue, the dirty deserted street. Hewitt looked with squinted gray eyes, his square, plain face expressionless.

The door of the cafe swung open again and Ed Ginnis, Hewitt's partner, came out. Without pausing Ginnis crossed the sidewalk toward the police coupe. Hewitt watched the short, heavily-built Irishman, and frowned. The two detectives had been detailed together a week before; neither had been pleased.

Hewitt started toward the coupe, stopped short. Thinned by the whipping wind, a distant shout cracked at his ears. Ginnis took his foot from the runningboard, turned his heavy-jawed face toward the waving man who stood before an alley mouth, half a block away. Ginnis called to his partner, "What you reckon he wants?"

Hewitt squinted. It was a cloudy, gray afternoon with paper and dust swirling in the wind. "It's Father Mottole," he said.

The man at the alley mouth waved his arms and shouted. Fear made his voice strident. "Come here! Quick!"

Hewitt ducked his wide shoulders, began to run. As he ran, he put his right hand to his hip, felt his service revolver



jar in its holster. Behind him he heard Ginnis' pounding footsteps.

Father Mottole was a small, slender Italian with soft black eyes and hair gray about the temples. He was not a priest, but was known affectionately in the Italian quarter as "Father" because of the innumerable charities which he financed and supervised.

His kindly, thin face was drawn now and his lips jerked spasmodically. He stared at Hewitt with round, frightened eyes then pointed into the alley with a trembling forefinger. "In there," he said. "It's in there!"

Hewitt stared into the alley. Brick walls on each side shaded the dirty pavement, made the place chill and gloomy. Orange peels and tin cans littered the concrete. Occasional barrels were piled with trash.

"It's in there," Mottole said again. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

Ginnis had stopped beside the Italian. "Okay, it's in there. But what the hell is it?"

"The child." Mottole pushed the words out with stiff lips. "I—" He stopped abruptly. Hewitt's broad shoulders tensed forward; his head twisted to one side, listening. And what he heard made him insensible to the chill of the wind.

From the gloom of the alley had come a low whimpering moan; a sobbing, choked noise like that of a tongueless beast. The moan crept through the murk of the alley, slid into the whipping wind, and faded.

Hewitt lunged forward. His hard heels thudded on the concrete, jarring flat sound against the narrow walls. Behind him he heard Ginnis, the frightened muttering of Mottole repeating a prayer in Italian.

A barrel, filled with trash and with the top hoop pulled loose, was on the right of the alley. As Hewitt went toward it a new odor smeared through the stink of

the garbage—a sweet and curiously sickening odor. Hewitt heard the whimpering wordless moan again as he reached the barrel. Then he stopped short, his eyes straining from their sockets.

Behind the barrel a child lay on her back. Her thin dress was ripped and torn, showing dark splotches in a dozen places, cold blue flesh in others. But it was the sight of the child's face—or of what had been her face—that made John Hewitt feel suddenly sick, that kept his big hands stiff in front of him as if frozen.

There was little blood on the child, though a black puddle was clotted beneath her head. The mouth was open and the lower lip split in three places, sagged back to show small white teeth. Strips had been cut from the cheeks, exposing raw gums. The eyes rolled white in lidless sockets. Each gash was edged with blood, as though something had been used to stop the bleeding excepting for the chin and lower lip. They were black with clotted blood and from the bottom of the gash in the left cheek a dark stream had poured to the pavement.

**M**USCLES stiff, Hewitt knelt beside the child and started to move his shaking hands toward her shoulders. Then he stopped abruptly. His breath whistled, in chill horror through his set teeth.

Ginnis' emotionless voice jarred his ears. "What the hell's happened to the kid?"

Hewitt did not move. He knelt forward, his hands almost touching the child's shoulders, his eyes riveted on the open mouth, and when he spoke his voice sounded flat and dead. "Her tongue's been cut out!" he said. "That's why she moaned, instead of crying."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Ginnis said, and broke off abruptly. Hewitt heard the sound of his shoes shuffling on the con-

crete. "Where'd Father Mottole go?" Ginnis demanded.

Hewitt got to his feet without taking his eyes from the child. Evidently she had fainted some time ago, moaned unconsciously. "I don't know," Hewitt said. "I thought he followed you down the alley."

"I thought so too, but—" Ginnis stopped. From the First Avenue sidewalk came the sound of running feet. They turned into the alley. Hewitt looked up, saw Mottole racing toward them, his long black overcoat open and flapping about his legs, arms swinging awkwardly. Then, a short distance from the detectives he stopped and stood panting, speechless.

The softness had gone from his eyes, leaving them hard and black. His face was set, though his lips still jerked spasmodically. "I called a police ambulance from the cafe," he panted. "I didn't tell anybody else there about—" He stopped, his eyes avoiding the horror on the ground. Slowly he began to pull off his overcoat. He handed it to Hewitt, and said, "Wrap the child in this. I—I can't."

Hewitt spread the coat on the pavement beside the girl, picked her up gently and placed her on it. She moaned as he touched her, and through his gloves he could feel the little body stiff and cold. He was tucking the sides about her when Ginnis snapped, "Well, Mottole, what were you doing in this alley? How in hell did you happen to find her?"

Hewitt got to his feet, noticed that there was blood on the forefinger of his left glove. He raised his eyes, looked at the other two men. Mottole's face was drawn and gray, but his lips had stopped twitching. "I wasn't in the alley," Mottole said. "I was passing on the sidewalk and heard—heard it. I thought perhaps it was a cat, freezing. When I came to see I found—that." He said the last word flatly.

Wind whistled, rustling paper and swirling dust and filth of the alley. A tin can, wind-driven, clanked over the pavement and into the brick wall. John Hewitt shivered inside his thick coat. Mottole's lips were blue with cold. There came the wail of a police siren on the wind. Then both wind and siren died abruptly, and the three men stood silent, staring at one another.

Mottole moved slow eyes to the bundle at his feet, crossed himself. But there was nothing religious in the harsh clack of his words.

"She was Pete Datoni's step-child, Maria. Datoni doesn't have much money, and he never spent what he had on Maria. She played about the streets here in rags." His words grew slower, each one falling like a heavy stone. "She must have been playing along the street when someone lured her into the alley—" He stopped, his thin hands clenched hard before him.

The wail of the ambulance siren grew suddenly loud. Tires screamed on pavement. Men pounded down the alley carrying a stretcher. Hewitt said, facing Ginnis, "You go to the hospital with the child, then take Father Mottole to the station-house." He moved his head toward the Italian. "You say she was Pete Datoni's child. Where does he live?" Somebody had to tell the father. But Hewitt didn't relish the job.

"810 Tenth Street."

Hewitt nodded glumly and walked along the alley toward First Avenue.

Behind him he heard the low exclamation of horror of the ambulance men, the tongueless moan of the mutilated child.

**N**UMBER 810 Tenth Street was a squat, brick house, crouched like a hunchback, close beside the walk. The right wing of the house protruded slightly forward to shelter the low steps running up to the front door. John Hewitt

went up the steps, struck the door with his gloved knuckles.

The door swung open. Hewitt stepped inside, shoulders hunched against the cold. The man pushed the door closed behind him and Hewitt turned in the gloom of the unlighted corridor to stare at a short, squarely-built Italian. The man looked curiously like the house in which he lived. Hewitt asked, "Pete Datoni?"

The man grunted assent. Hewitt flipped his coat to show the detective's badge. Datoni's eyes blinked nervously; his thick-knuckled fingers quivered in front of him. "What happened?" he asked. "Something to—my Maria?"

Hewitt went suddenly tense. His square face snapped forward. "Why?" he barked. "What do you think has happened?"

Datoni backed away, his face showing pale in the darkness. Then suddenly he was close to the detective, his big hands clutching at Hewitt's coat. "Tell me!" he said hoarsely. "Is it something to my Maria? I tried—I tried to protect her."

Hewitt looked into the man's grief-stricken face, thinking, "It's going to be harder to tell than I thought." Aloud he said, "What do you mean, you tried to protect her? Protect her from what?"

Datoni loosened Hewitt's coat. His face was pale, but composed. "I knew it," he said. He paused, added, "Come in here, and I will tell you. I—I am glad you have come."

He took two steps down the hall, turned right. Hewitt followed him into a sparsely furnished living room. There were three windows, one on a side. Near the wall was a sofa. Datoni gestured toward one of the three chairs in the room, dropped into another.

For a moment Datoni sat in the semi-darkness, head bowed, shoulders drooping. When he looked up his face was hard, determined. He began to speak slowly.

"I have been warned not to tell the police. They said I would be murdered if I did. But"—his voice went high and his hands began to shake—"I don't care! If something has happened to my Maria, I will tell the police—everything!"

Hewitt fumbled off his glove, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it. Briefly he told of finding the child. When he had finished, Datoni sat clutching the arms of his chair, his knuckles bone white. "They said they would kill her," he said slowly. "I got my money from the bank to give them. It was all I had. I only had four hundred dollars. They wanted five thousand dollars and so they did that to—to my Maria. Now they will kill me!" His voice jumped high, cracked. "But I will tell! I will tell the police! Then let them kill me."

Hewitt leaned toward Datoni, eyes fastened on him. He said, "They won't kill you. Don't worry—we'll take care of that. Tell me who threatened the little girl."

Slowly Datoni shook his head. His jaw was shut hard, but his face was pale, hopeless. "A police guard will not help. There is no help. This—this thing—it is not human!"

**A** CHILL feeling of something unearth-  
ly, supernatural crept through John  
Hewitt. He leaned toward Datoni, eyes  
searching the man's face. "What do you  
mean?"

Datoni rubbed his fingers across his pale cheek. He looked at Hewitt for a moment, and an almost pathetic hope crept into his face. He said, "You—the police, I will tell. You will watch me." Then his voice broke again. "But I don't care. If it will help my little Maria they can kill me!"

"It came two days ago," Datoni went on. "There was a slow knocking on the back door. When I went, no one was

there. Nothing but a paper. It said that I should get \$5,000 and hold it for—for— There wasn't any name signed, just two bloody marks that looked like knife blades or scissors. It said that if I didn't get the money it, the thing, would get my Maria. I did not have the money. I got all I had to give them, but somehow they knew I did not have enough. And so . . . ." His head fell on his chest.

Hewitt said, his lips curled thin and hard, "Have you got the note?"

Datoni looked at Hewitt's set, determined face. He seemed to hesitate. Then he said, "Yes. I will get them." He stood up.

Hewitt said, "Them? You've had another?"

"It came this morning. It was like the other. The knocking and nobody there." Datoni went through the door. Hewitt could hear his shoes scuff along the bare hallway.

Three minutes later he came back into the room. The pieces of paper crinkled as Hewitt opened one. Crude, scrawling writing said:

It is too late to save your daughter, because you did not get enough money. Get \$5,000—or you will be next. It is death to tell the police.

Below were two blood-colored, V-shaped marks. It looked as if the blades of a pair of scissors had been dipped in blood and held against the paper. The first warning was signed in the same way.

Hewitt folded the papers, stuffed them in his coat pocket. "I'll find the murderer, I'll—" He stopped short.

From the rear of the house came an ominous, dull knocking. Something was beating in heavy monotones against the back door.

Hewitt's eyes jumped to Datoni. The man had dropped into his chair. His face was livid, half-turned toward the sound

of the knocking. His fingers gripped the arms of the chair until his shoulders quivered.

"It's—it's the thing!" he whispered.

John Hewitt surged to his feet. His right hand jumped to his hip, came back holding the .38 police special. "Stay here!" he snapped. Stiff-kneed, on the balls of his feet, he swung out of the room, down the hallway toward the rear.

The knocking continued, a muffled, heavy beating.

The hall ended in a small, dark kitchen. Across the kitchen was the back door. As Hewitt stepped into the room the knocking thudded loud—and suddenly quit.

Hewitt hurled himself at the door, ripped it open, gun ready. Cold wind swept over a small, trash-littered yard, over bare steps, and moaned through the doorway. The steps and yard were empty.

For twenty seconds Hewitt stood motionless, his knuckles white about the pistol butt. He shook his head. It was impossible for a human to have knocked on that door, and vanished in the half second it had taken him to cross the kitchen. Yet someone, or some *thing*, had knocked and disappeared.

The gun still in his hand, Hewitt went down the steps and across the yard to the right. At the corner of the house he stopped. There were a half dozen scraggly rose bushes, bare of leaves. Beyond the rose bushes was the front sidewalk. He turned, crossed to the other side of the house. Here a high brick wall shut the place in. In the house beyond the wall Hewitt heard a baby crying. Shaking his head, Hewitt thrust the gun into the holster, turned back toward the kitchen.

Half up the steps he halted. Just inside the door was a white square of paper. He stooped, picked it up, and cursed softly. Above the bloody V of the forked knives was scrawled:

Get out of this and stay out!

**A**BRUPTLY the note crushed under Hewitt's thick fingers. For a moment he frowned as he wondered how any human being could have known so quickly that he was here. Then he remembered the department coupe parked in front, and a thin smile curled his lips. So this thing that made the mark of the bloody scissors would frighten him out, would it? He stalked into the house, jabbing the note into his pocket.

As he started up the hall he saw the dark blur of Datoni. The man was crouched against the front door, making little whimpering sounds of fear. Hewitt started toward him and Datoni straightened, his eyes dark in his bloodless face. Hewitt asked, "You got a telephone?"

"Yes. But what—what was there?" Datoni moved down the hall three steps, switched on the lights.

Hewitt said, "Nothing. Just a note for me." He saw the telephone on a small table, picked it up and dialed headquarters, and asked that a detective be sent to guard Datoni. For a moment he listened, then said, "Right. I'll go over." He hung up and turned to Datoni.

"There'll be a detective here in five minutes. Then I'm going to the emergency hospital. They've found another little girl. Her tongue's been cut out and they say she can't move for some reason. Can't budge a finger. She may be connected with this. You stay here and don't go out of the house."

Fear rode high in Datoni's face, but the Italian was fighting for self-control. He said, almost to himself, "I told the police. But I am not afraid. I am not afraid!"

Hewitt heard the car stop in front a few minutes later, and opened the front door for Detective Sam Englehart. Englehart was a gaunt tall man whose bony face terminated in a wide lantern jaw.

Briefly Hewitt outlined what had happened. Then he opened the front door and stepped out. A cold wind whipped about him.

An arc light to his right threw a dull glow along the dirty street as he stepped to his coupe parked against the curb. He slid under the steering wheel and something pricked his right leg.

He sat perfectly still on the seat for a moment, his eyebrows drawn together in puzzlement. Slowly he moved his right hand along the seat to where the thing had pricked his leg. His fingers touched something small and cylindrical. For thirty seconds John Hewitt sat without moving, frozen by abject terror. Horror such as he had never known flooded his body. He knew what the thing beneath his hand was even before he snapped on the dash-light.

Strapped to the seat with black adhesive, the point raised so that it had jabbed his leg when he slid inside, was a hypodermic. The plunger was strapped to the seat and the bowl was still more than half full of a murky green liquid.

With numbed shaking fingers, Hewitt pulled the adhesive loose, picked up the hypodermic. Very little of the fluid could have entered his body. There had been no pain except for that first tiny prick. He bent his right knee, swung the leg. Nothing seemed wrong with it—yet.

He said half aloud, "I wonder if . . ." Then he stopped, and wiped the heel of his hand along his sweat-damp brow. "It can't be! I—I didn't get much!" Still holding the hypodermic, he kicked the motor into action.

**J**OHN HEWITT walked slowly from the hospital toward his parked coupe. His friend, Dr. Frank Sidney, would analyze the hypodermic contents. He had gone into another wing of the building to look at the second injured child. "The

daughter of Anthony Lavelli, 1212 Second Avenue," the nurse had said.

Hewitt's face was grim as he thought of the little girl. She had lain flat on her back, her eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling. There had been a slight stain of blood about her mouth but there had been no other mark on the stiff, rigid, little body. "Her—her tongue's been cut out," the nurse had gasped. "But there's something else wrong, too. The doctors don't know what. She hasn't budged since she came here. She's paralyzed, and yet her heart's beating and her eyes reflect, but the lids won't work."

Hewitt thought of the child, and of her open eyes showing that the brain behind them was active. She knew she was maimed, knew she was dying, but she was unable to move one finger, one eyelid.

"Worse than death!" he muttered. "A living, creeping, conscious death! He stepped to the curb, pulled open the door of the coupe, stepped toward the running board.

He heard the clack of leather on steel. He staggered, flung his arms against the car, caught his balance. And then his breath froze in his body as the terrifying realization swept over him.

His right foot had struck the running board, but his foot had not felt the impact!

His lips apart, Hewitt looked down at his foot. He stomped it heavily on the pavement. The shoe thudded and Hewitt felt the jar in his leg.

But his foot had never known it touched the ground. His right foot was dead!

For a full minute Hewitt stood there, body bent, looking at his foot. Horribly clear he saw again the girl on the hospital cot, her eyes open, her face rigid, her body utterly paralyzed.

Slowly he straightened. He whispered, "It can't be! Not—not totally. I only got a drop or two. It can't—" with his

right hand he struck the spot on his hip where the needle had entered. The flesh was firm, alive. He tried the foot again. And again there was no feeling.

He climbed into the coupe. His mind refused to accept what had happened, struggled to find some way around the evidence. He leaned over again and tapped the foot with his fingers. He might as well have tapped the gear lever.

Fifteen minutes later he swung the coupe toward the curb, pulled the dead weight of his foot from the floor boards, pushed it against the brake. The car stopped with a jerk. He sat still then, looking at the home of the child who now lay at the emergency hospital, living, but dead.

The house was a large, square building, the top barely visible over the high brick wall that cut it off from the sidewalk. There was a wooden gate in the middle of the wall. Hewitt smiled grimly as he looked at it. Evidently Lazelli had money.

Hewitt slapped his right ankle twice with his palm. Then his mouth was a gray gash in a colorless face. The ankle was numb.

THE wall offered protection from the wind as Hewitt limped through the gate and stood inside. It was dark and he could not see much. The front of the house, where lights showed from four windows, was about sixty feet away. The brick wall closed the house in on all four sides, but left ample lawns. To his right Hewitt could see the naked limbs of a maple tree. In front of him a concrete walk led to a small fountain, circled it, and went on to the steps of the house.

Hewitt's shoes clopped unevenly as he went forward.

The front door was massive with a heavy brass knocker. Hewitt lifted the knocker, rapped. Waiting, he heard a truck lumbering down Second Avenue.

The door swung open and light spilled out across the porch. A girl was holding the door and Hewitt stood, mouth half open, staring at her. She was slender and tall with jet black hair that went in little lapping curls back from a broad, pale forehead. Her face was in shadow, but Hewitt could see its perfect oval outline, the soft curve that was her mouth and the dark pools that were her eyes.

Hewitt bowed slightly, said, "Is Mr. Lazelli here?" He fingered his lapel, showing the badge.

The girl said, "Yes. Come in." She opened the door wider and Hewitt stepped over the sill. He swung his left foot first, then pulled the right, a dead weight, carefully after. The girl closed the door, looked at Hewitt, and asked, "You come to see father about. . . ." She stopped, biting her lower lip with small, white teeth. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. ". . . About sister?" She finished.

"Yes."

The girl turned, took four steps down the hall, knocked on a closed door on her left. A man's voice asked curtly. "What is it?"

The girl pushed the door open. "Here's another detective, father," she announced and stepped back as John Hewitt walked past her into the room.

The room was poorly, barely furnished. A massive chandelier, holding only one small bulb, hung in the middle. Directly under the light was a desk and behind that a small swivel chair. Two straight chairs were drawn up in front of the desk. In them Ginnis and Father Mottole twisted around to face Hewitt as he entered the room.

Ginnis said, "Well, here you are. One by one we all get here. Me first; then Father Mottole; now you."

Hewitt didn't answer. He stood flat-footed looking at the man behind the desk. Often he had heard of Anthony

Lazelli, but this was the first time he had seen the man. Reported to be one of the wealthiest Italians in the city, Lazelli was also a mystery. He seldom went outside of his walled garden, and he had the name of being a miser. Glancing at the bare floor, the frayed curtains, Hewitt had a hunch that the gossip was probably correct.

Lazelli did not get out of his chair. He leaned stooped shoulders forward, put his hands on the desk. His head was too big for his body and sat on the end of a long, scrawny neck. It was almost bald with occasional, glossy black hairs which lay flat against his skull. His mouth was pinched and dark; his eyes narrow, intense, almost mad.

The detective balanced on his right foot. He had the odd sensation that he was swinging in the air, not touching the floor at all. He swung his left leg forward, pulled his right one after it and stood with the fingers of his gloved hands on Lazelli's desk. "I'm John Hewitt," he said. "Your daughter was the—second child to be injured today, and—"

Lazelli said angrily, "I know that."

Hewitt's lips twitched in surprise. He remembered that this man had not visited the hospital to see his daughter. Now he seemed more annoyed than grieved. Hewitt remembered the grief and the terror-stricken face of Datoni, and anger made his voice brittle. "What else do you know? Who did this?"

Light flashed in Lazelli's black eyes. One corner of his pinched mouth quivered. He said, "I don't know. How should I?"

Ginnis said, "That's his story and he's sticking to it."

**F**AATHER MOTTOLE pointed a slim finger toward Lazelli and said softly, "There's no way you should know who injured the child. But you should go see

her in the hospital. You should make some provision for her care. There are specialists who. . . ."

Lazelli struck the desk with clenched fists. He shouted. "Get out of here! Don't come to my home telling me what to do! All of you! Get out!"

Hewitt's broad shoulders swayed toward Lazelli. His face was rock-hard, all sympathy for the man gone. "You may not know who did it," he growled. "But you damn well know why. How much money did those bloody scissors ask for?"

Ginnis slammed to his feet, snarling, "Bloody what?"

Lazelli squirmed in his chair, eyes darting furtively around the room. Hewitt said, "All right. How much?"

Lazelli slumped in his chair, said, "They wanted \$50,000."

Ginnis asked, "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Some extortionist who signs himself with a pair of bloody scissors or some such thing wrote Datoni asking for money. Datoni didn't have it, so they got his kid," Hewitt said. "Same thing here."

"Maybe Datoni didn't," Ginnis said, almost under his breath. Then in a rush he added, "But this guy's got plenty." He whirled on Lazelli. "Why the hell didn't you pay? Don't you care what happens to your kids?"

Lazelli sat staring at his feet. In the light of the one globe his bald head looked like a fortune teller's crystal. He said sullenly, "They wanted \$50,000. I couldn't pay that much. I would have paid something, but I couldn't pay that much."

"Why didn't you tell them you couldn't pay so much?" Father Mottole asked quietly. He had folded his thin hands on the desk in front of him. "How much did you offer to pay?"

Lazelli said, "Nothing. I didn't know how to get in touch with them. They just—just left the notes."

Hewitt asked, "Have you had another, since the warning about Maria?"

"No. But I won't pay! I won't!" He sprang to his feet. His fists shook in front of him and his eyes flamed evilly. "They may kill me, but I'm not afraid. Not afraid of things I can't see! I won't pay. I—" He screamed shrilly.

John Hewitt saw the paper fluttering over his head the second Lazelli screamed. It came floating down, tilting from side to side in the still air. The paper seemed to have dropped *through* the ceiling, yet there had been no sound.

It came down between the four motionless men, flattened out on the desk top, slid to a stop. For three full seconds the men stared, still and silent. Ginnis muttered, "Well, I'll be damned!" Hewitt stood, breathing heavily through his nostrils. Without moving he read the crudely printed message below the marks made by a pair of bloody scissors:

\$100,000 or your daughter Rose at midnight!

A long while the four men stood motionless, staring at the note.

Hewitt's brain was racing. Why had Ginnis jumped with alarm at mention of the bloody scissors? What did he know about them? And Father Mottole—why was he always on hand? Abruptly he remembered Datoni, wondered if anything had happened there since he left.

Hewitt's hand clenched hard. Death, like a strangling vine, was creeping up his leg.

Hewitt turned toward Ginnis, and said, tightly, "You stay here and look after this man. I'm going to check on Datoni now. I'll be back by midnight to help if anything happens."

Ginnis sneered. "Hell, nothin's going to happen here. Nothing would have happened"—he flung contemptuous eyes toward Lazelli—"if that buzzard thought more of his kids than his money."

With awkward, clumping steps, like a man with a new wooden leg, Hewitt pulled open the door, and stepping out into the hall, closed the door behind him.

As the door shut, Hewitt bent sharply, tapped his right calf with his finger tips. It had no feeling, and when he tried to wiggle the foot it was as if he had tried, by sitting and thinking, to move a wall. He struck his leg higher up. It was dead to the knee.

Hewitt didn't have time to be afraid. He had to work quickly now. In another four or five hours, perhaps, he would be like the child in the hospital, motionless, dead, except for a brain that functioned and eyes that stared fixedly. But wouldn't die; he hadn't got much of the fluid. Surely this paralysis would stop at the knee. If it didn't. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Bullet Proof Death

**H**EWITT turned still in the hallway and saw Rose Lazelli standing in a darkened doorway across from him. He stepped toward her unsteadily. She looked down at his foot; her eyebrows arched as she opened her mouth to speak. Hewitt shook his head, said, "It's nothing." He stopped close to her and looked down into eyes that were like pools of black shadows. She had been crying.

Hewitt said, "Has your father been in the house all day?"

The girl nodded. "He shuts himself up in the back. I never see him."

"Who else has been here this afternoon? In the room where they are now?"

The girl dabbed at her eyes with a small handkerchief. Even crying and grief-stricken he noticed the girl's soft beauty, the full curve of her lips, the outline of her slender body beneath the clinging dress . . . She crumpled the handkerchief

in her hand and said, "Nobody except the detective who's in there now. He was there for a while before father came from the back of the house. Then, fifteen minutes ago, Father Mottole came. In the afternoon there was a pedler, trying to sell father some silks. But he didn't stay long. Father wouldn't talk to him. They were lovely things, and I—wanted—" She tried to smile, but her lips quivered. "What—what have they done to sister? I'm so frightened!"

Hewitt moved one big hand toward the girl and stopped abruptly. That living death had threatened to strike this girl at midnight. For a sickening moment Hewitt visioned her face, ripped and mangled as that of little Maria had been.

Hewitt looked at his wrist watch. 9:15. There was no need of telling the girl about the note now. He said, "There's nothing for you to worry about. I don't know how badly hurt your little sister is, but I'll find out and let you know."

The girl's hands caught Hewitt's arm. "Thank you," she said.

John Hewitt turned on the heel that had no feeling and went toward the door, and dragged himself toward the car.

At a corner drug store Hewitt stopped the coupe and went inside. His knee was stiff, dead now, and he had to walk by swinging his leg from the hip. He went inside a telephone booth, dialed the news room of the *Star*, and asked for Ralph Gill.

When he heard the reporter's voice Hewitt said, "Ralph, go through your files, find out everything you can about Pete Datoni." He spelled the name out. "Then check up on Anthony Lazelli, Ed Ginnis, and Father Mottole. Get in touch with Dr. Sidney at the Emergency Hospital, tell him I said give you the story because I don't have time. But don't break it until I let you know. I'll call you back in a little while." He hung up, called

the Emergency Hospital, learned that Dr. Sidney was still in the laboratory, and asked about the girl.

"Her heart beats and respiration are both growing slower," the nurse said. "The doctors don't have much hope for her."

Hewitt said, "Thank you," and heard the nurse hang up. So, it was death at the end. Total paralysis, and then death. Hewitt rubbed the fingers of his hand through his hair. "It's got my knee," he said aloud, "but it'll stop there. It must stop there! But whether it gets me or not, I'll get it." He pushed the door of the telephone booth open and swayed outside.

A soda jerker glimpsed Hewitt's face. He stared after the detective, unconscious that the carbonated water had filled the glass and was running over.

**I**T WAS difficult driving with his right leg stretched stiffly in front of him, but the traffic was light along Second Avenue. He turned east to First, and just outside of Datoni's home he cut the switch and braked the car to a halt with his left foot.

John Hewitt slipped from the coupe, and hobbled toward the squat, hunch-backed house. He went up the three brick steps, left foot first, dragging his right leg afterward, and knocked on the door.

No sound came from the inside of the house.

Why didn't Englehart open the door? He knocked again. The wind whipped away the sound, and the house was as still as if he had knocked on the door of a tomb.

Hewitt twisted the knob. The door swung open. He stepped through into a dark, silent hallway. Behind him gray light seeped through the half-open door; ahead blackness crouched like a hunted animal.

Hewitt's hand moved toward his hip and came back clenching the revolver. He moved sideways, pushed his back against the wall. He called, "Englehart! Hey Sam!" His voice rumbled down the narrow hallway, and died.

The light switch, he remembered, was near the door of the living room. He shifted his gun to his left hand, put his right hand against the wall, started toward the switch. His left foot struck the floor with a dull thud. His right shoe scraped as he dragged it forward. He swung his left foot ahead. It struck something—something soft.

Hewitt staggered, tried to jerk his right foot forward. He clawed at the wall with his right hand, swayed, pitched headlong. He struck lying across a human body.

He writhed away from the body, jerking up his gun. There was no sound excepting the echo of his movement. Tensely he pushed his right hand along the floor, touched the body and moved along an arm to the face. He jerked back his hand, gasping so that the sound stirred in the dark hallway. The man's face was a mass of blood.

John Hewitt almost screamed aloud. Every muscle in his body was taut as a bow string and his teeth scraped together.

"God!" he whispered. The darkness soaked up the word.

Hewitt put both hands on the chest of the man lying there. He drew his left leg under his body, straightened his arms, managed to get on his feet. He fumbled for the light switch and snapped it on.

In the white flood of light Hewitt saw the body of the detective, Englehart. He lay on his back, the eyes wide open and staring. The half-open mouth was a pool of blood and Hewitt knew instinctively the tongue had been cut away. There was no sign of disorder in the hall; only the body of Englehart, stark and horrible.

With stiff fingers Hewitt found the

light switch of the living room and clicked it. Light jumped into the room. John Hewitt gasped.

Flat on the floor, head near the chair in which he had sat earlier, was Pete Datoni. A little splotch of blood showed above the man's temple. His eyes were shut and his arms outflung. Hewitt went with swaying steps toward him, tried to kneel. His right knee wouldn't bend. Hewitt clutched his thigh and then the last vestige of color drained from his face. Three inches above the knee his leg was dead, unfeeling.

Hewitt put his gun in its holster, slipped to a sitting position beside Datoni. He looked at the blood-stained bump above Datoni's ear, then found the faint flutter of pulse in the man's wrist. Hewitt began to chafe the Italian's wrists.

Datoni's eyes had been open a half minute before they began to focus. He looked around dazedly, saw Hewitt and sat up. "What—what was it?" he gasped weakly.

Hewitt said, "You tell me. I came in and found you here. Englehart's in the hall—dead."

Datoni shook his head dazedly. Fear, hatred, terror, leaped into his face at once. His voice was husky. "I was sitting here. Something knocked on the door and the detective went. I heard him say, 'Hello!' Then he screamed. And . . ." Again Datoni rubbed a shaking hand across his eyes.

"And then?" Hewitt prompted.

"I jumped up and saw a man in the door—a short, thickset man. His coat lapel was turned up and there was a detective's badge on it. Then he jumped at me, and—I don't remember what happened. It couldn't have been long ago. He must have heard you, and ran."

Hewitt drew a long breath through clenched teeth. Ed Ginnis and Sam Englehart had known each other, though

there had been no friendship between them. The man Datoni had seen fitted Ginnis' description. But why had Ginnis come here? Hewitt let the air from his lungs slowly.

He clutched the arm of Datoni's chair and pulled himself erect. Then half-way up he paused, muscles stiffening. The slow, heavy pounding sounded once more on the back door.

**S**NARLING, Hewitt jerked his gun from the holster, started in a staggering, rolling run for the kitchen. Twice he tripped, caromed against the wall, but caught himself and kept going. He snapped open the kitchen door and almost fell down the low back steps.

Out in the dingy back yard a white paper, caught by the wind, skidded like a ghost. Hewitt stood still, muscles jerking, eyes big in their sockets.

The yard was empty!

Hewitt went toward the right corner of the house. He moved awkwardly, but the gun in his hand was steady. Once before he had heard this knocking, and had come to find nobody. And again there was nothing. He should have known that, as on the other occasion, he would find nothing.

He cursed softly as he stepped around the corner of the house and saw the twisted, deformed shadows of the dwarfed rose bushes, the grayness beyond them that was First Avenue.

And then the Thing swept at him!

There was no time to see distinctly, even if the darkness had not muffled his sight. There was a sweep of purplish robes, the dull gleam of a monstrous, oversized head, long black hands, and the glint of a hypodermic.

Hewitt leaped sideways. Something touched his coat, and cloth ripped. He tried to jerk his dead leg under him, failed, and pitched into a rose bush.

Thorns tore at his trousers, jabbed his flesh.

He rolled to his back, saw the monster whirl and dive toward him. Hewitt's gun roared.

The Thing stopped in its dive, staggered. The revolver jumped in Hewitt's hand, crashed again. The creature wavered, whirled abruptly, and raced toward the back of the house.

Hewitt cursed hollowly. What living thing, human or animal, could carry two .38 slugs in its chest and run at that speed? Hewitt writhed to the side of the house, pawed against it, got to his feet.

The Thing had disappeared around the rear of the building. Hewitt started after it. His dead leg hit a rose bush and he fell again. His forehead struck against the brick wall of the house. Lights burst in the darkness. He half rolled, struck the soft dirt on his side, twitched—and lay still.

John Hewitt blinked, pushed his hand against the red mist of pain before his eyes and fought his way back to consciousness. He struggled to a sitting position, tried to get up, by climbing to the side of the house. His head whirled dizzily.

Looking down, he saw his right leg stiff in front of him, his left leg slightly bent. Remembrance flooded his mind. He rolled over, put his hands flat on the ground, pulled his left leg under him, straightened his arms. Twice he fell back. Then, holding against the wall, he got to his feet. He took one step toward the back of the house, stopped, and looked at his watch. It was 11:45!

In just fifteen minutes this fiend would call at the home of Anthony Lavelli. Lavelli would not pay, and . . .

Hewitt choked as he thought of the girl with her dark eyes raised toward his, her hand soft on his arm. He started a

stumbling run toward the sidewalk. No time now to go looking for Datoni.

As he stumbled along Hewitt beat his hand against his right leg. It was dead almost to the hip. He had to fight the sluggish muscles into movement.

Panting, he crawled into the department coupe, dragging his stiff right leg over the seat, leaving the door swinging. With his left foot he kicked the starter, worked the clutch. He used the hand accelerator.

The coupe raced along First Avenue, skidded into Tenth Street, screamed into First. Hewitt's hands clenched hard on the wheel. He, John Hewitt, what good would he be to protect the girl? The death that crawled up his leg had almost reached his hip. When it did he would be unable to move, except by crawling, pulling himself by his hands. How long would he be able to do that?

The coupe rocked to a halt before the brick wall that enclosed Lazelli's home. Hewitt slipped out, balanced carefully, started toward the house.

**H**E circled the fountain, went up the walk toward the steps, his eyes jumping about the dark lawn. Not a shadow moved in the stillness. There was no sound except for the lugubrious moan of the wind, the creaking of the bare, wind stripped limbs of the maple tree.

Without pausing to knock, Hewitt pushed open the front door and stumbled into the dimly lighted hallway. He swung the door shut.

It was then he saw the girl, standing in the door of the room where her father had been earlier. Her eyes were wide with fear. She sighed, "Oh! It's you!" and some of the terror went out of her face.

Hewitt was breathing hard. He followed her into a side room.

"Where's your father?"

"He—he's not here. They all left just after you did." Her dark, troubled eyes moved toward Hewitt's leg, his trousers torn by the rose bushes, back to the bruise on his forehead. "You've been hurt!"

Hewitt said, "Nothing bad." He bent his left arm, looked at the wrist watch. It was 11:55. He snapped, "Quick! Call the police. Tell them to send a whole squad. And get 'em here quick!"

The girl's face blanched as she came closer to him, her lips half parted, her eyes round. "I can't call them. We've no phone."

Hewitt said, "Good God!" His hand snaked to his hip, stopped and dropped limply at his side. The gun was gone! He had left it where he had fallen. "It doesn't matter," he muttered. "I shot him before. He must have worn a steel vest. Damn those soft nosed bullets."

Rose Lavelli caught his coat with quivering fingers. "What do you mean?"

Hewitt gripped her shoulders, twisted her toward the door. "Get out of the house quick! Call the cops and send them here." He pushed her toward the door.

The girl swayed under his hands, but her feet did not move. "Tell me," she said. "What is it?"

Hewitt swore. "The Thing that got your sister is coming here, now. It's already got me. I can't live. I'll wait for it here. You go—quick!"

The girl put her hands to his coat again. She whispered, "No. I don't want to leave you. Let's both . . ."

"We can't!" Hewitt barked. "I can hardly move." His breathing was hard, tense. "You go now—while there's time!"

Her hands tightened on his coat. "But you . . . you . . ." She stopped abruptly. Terror had returned to her eyes; her hands still clutched Hewitt's coat.

Something scraped along the floor at the rear of the house. There was an un-

steady thumping. The sound moved toward the front. *Thump—thump—thump!* It was as if a man walked slowly, dragging a heavy load.

Hewitt heard the girl's wrenched gasp. Her hands seemed frozen to his coat and under them he heard the heavy pounding of his heart.

*Thump! Thump!* The beating, dragging sound of the steps came on. The girl turned, as though drawn by a magnet, to face the door.

The sound approached the door and paused. For one long, deathly second silence hung like a poised, menacing weight above the room. Then the sound scraped forward, closer.

The girl screamed a half strangled cry, and cowered back. Air whistled from Hewitt's lungs. In the door stood the creature which had attacked him. And in the creature's arms, the face a mass of blood, was the body of Ed Ginnis!

At the door the man dropped Ginnis. The detective hit the floor on his back, lay still. The impact jarred fresh blood from his mouth to well across his cheek and puddle on the floor.

**T**HE man stood near Ginnis' stiff body. In the dim light that came from the heavy chandelier over his head Hewitt could see that the man wore a black cloth mask in which slits had been cut for eyes. The bald, egg-shaped head was a helmet with a few painted black lines for hair. Then Hewitt saw the man's hands. Horror and revelation leaped to his eyes.

The hands were large, with blunt, strong fingers and over them thin, flesh-colored gloves had been pulled. On the inside of the first two fingers of the right hand razor-sharp knives of steel were fastened. Hewitt understood now the mystery of the tongueless bodies. . . .

The man stepped farther into the room, and the girl shrank close beside Hewitt.

The man looked at her, snarled into his mask, "Where is Lazelli?"

The girl said, "I—I don't know."

Fire glinted in the black eyes behind the mask. The thick fingers dived into a pocket of the robe, came back holding a large hypodermic. A muffled voice snarled, "Where's the money? I told him I'd be here at midnight."

The girl slid along the desk toward Hewitt. Panic leapt from her large dark eyes. Hewitt felt the soft touch of her shoulder. She looked up at him, then toward the masked figure. "I—I don't know," she whimpered. "He didn't leave any with me."

The gloved hands went stiff and hard. An insane light came in the man's eyes as a snarling, wordless sound came from his throat. "All right," he said. "When I finish tonight he'll come across—if he has another chance. I—" The man pushed the hypodermic in front of him, took one step toward the girl.

Rose Lazelli caught Hewitt's left arm in both of hers. She screamed; a choked, terrified cry. Hewitt put his right hand on her arm. He said, "Quiet," and edging his body a foot from the desk, pushed the girl behind him. He told her, still looking at the masked man, "You keep behind me. When I get my hands on him, you run—out of the house, out of the grounds. Shout for help...."

The girl's hands tightened on Hewitt's arm. "I—I don't want to run—to leave you!" Her voice was a whisper.

The figure chuckled. He took one step closer to Hewitt, stopped and drew a revolver with his left hand. He chuckled again. "But you will not get your hands on me, my friend. And after you are dead...."

The man gestured with the muzzle of the gun. "Do you get out of the way," he said flatly, "and let me get at the girl; or do I shoot you first?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Death Strikes Home

JOHN HEWITT could feel the soft touch of the girl's body, hear her rapid breathing behind him. Muscles bulged like frozen ropes along his jaw. One bullet from the masked man's revolver—just one—and the girl would be in the grasp of those cruel knife-blades. . . . There was little chance that the sound of the shot would bring help.

One sharp jab of that glittering needle into the girl's white flesh, only a second to pry open her red mouth, to clip with those steel-lined, scissor-like fingers.

The gun muzzle centered on Hewitt's belly. "If you are going to move," the man said, "move now."

Hewitt leaned his wide shoulders forward, estimated the distance between them. Not more than ten feet, but with one leg at dead anchor. . . .

Hewitt said, "All right—shoot. The cops will—" He broke off short.

A heavy pounding sounded on the front door. The noise boomed through the still house.

Startled, the masked man jerked back. Hewitt grinned and leaned forward, eyes on the gun in the man's hand. "The cops," he said. "I telephoned them to come here at midnight. Now go ahead and shoot—and then try to get out."

He was praying, inside, that his bluff would work.

The gun wavered in the other's hand. Eyes were red fires behind the mask. The masked man sneered, "It's a stall; it's not the cops. It's—"

Again the front door shook under the knocking, harder this time. The sound rolled into the room where three persons stood waiting for death.

Hewitt said, "It is the cops, you fool!"

Dancing fire hardened in the other's eyes. He shifted his hand along the re-

volver, caught it by the barrel. He said huskily, "I've never failed, and I won't fail now. You'll die, anyway. And I'll get the girl too!"

He took one step toward John Hewitt, drawing back the gun to smash it against the detective's temple.

Slow, heavy knocks beat on the front door. Beat monotonously, endlessly.

The murderer took another step forward. The dull light from the one small bulb in the chandelier gleamed on the hypodermic needle in his left hand.

Hewitt tried to swing forward to meet the man—to give the girl a chance to run. He put his weight on his left leg, tried to move the right one.

It was dead to the hip!

The man laughed—a creeping, ghoulish sound. He swung the revolver back so that the butt was close to his temple and stepped in to smash it against John Hewitt's head.

Behind him, Hewitt heard the girl gasp sharply. Then Hewitt saw his chance. He flung his arms above his head, and his fingers clutched the chandelier. He kicked his left foot back against the desk, shoved forward. His left leg doubled under him, straightened in one smashing drive.

The masked man saw the foot driving at his face and brought the gun-butt down. Hewitt felt sharp pain flare through his leg. The foot crashed into the man's face, hurling him backward. Hewitt's fingers slipped on the chandelier and his body plunged. His head struck the floor and the room whirled dizzily.

**D**ULL aching throbs beat through John Hewitt's left leg, but he was dimly conscious of cool hands on his face, of a warm, stirring perfume in his nostrils. Through his whole body a slow pounding ache beat sickeningly.

Conscious, Hewitt knew that he still

lay where he had fallen, that he had not been out more than five or ten seconds. Rose Lavelli knelt beside him, her hands cool against his face, her dark eyes anxious.

Hewitt tried to rise, but his right leg lay stiff. He snapped, "What—what about that killer?" He tried again to get up. Hot pain flamed through his left leg.

The girl looked beyond Hewitt, then back to the detective's drawn face. "He fell on his hypodermic," she said. "He hasn't moved since."

Again the knocking jarred through the house. "Is it really the police?" the girl asked. Her fingers moved softly across Hewitt's forehead. She slipped her left arm under his shoulders, helped him to a sitting position, let him lean against the desk.

Hewitt said, "I don't think so. Go see."

The girl went out of the room. Hewitt looked across the bare floor at the sprawled man who had made the mark of the bloody scissors.

His right hand was under his hip. His masked head lay twisted to one side. Hewitt laughed harshly, without humor. "Well," he said aloud. "We killed each other. But you went first."

Steps sounded in the hall and he looked toward the door. Dr. Frank Sidney came into the room. He had a black physician's bag in his right hand. Behind him came Rose Lavelli.

"Thank God I found you!" Sidney panted. "Can you still move?"

Hewitt said, "A little, but my right leg's dead."

Sidney flung his bag on the desk above Hewitt's head, talked as he fumbled in it. "I found what was in that green fluid—by luck, mainly. Deadly as hell," he said cheerfully, "a poison only recently discovered, and based in tetra-ethyl lead. I happened to have been doing some research

on it at the hospital lately, but we never knew what effect it would have on a human being before. There's an antidote, all right, if you get it in time."

Sidney, a hypodermic in his hand, knelt beside Hewitt, jerked up the detective's left trouser leg. Hewitt winced. Sidney said, "Something hit you an awful wallop on the leg; may have broken it." He jabbed the needle into the flesh.

Rose Lavelli stood behind the doctor, watching every move. When the doctor had made an injection in each leg, Hewitt said, "This lady's the sister of the little girl at the hospital. How's the youngster?"

Sidney grinned. "Doing splendidly," he said. "I gave her an antidote before I left." He turned, looked at the masked body sprawled on the floor. "Who's this?"

Hewitt said, "He's the man that's been spreading the green fluid, and he's got a dose in himself. . . . His name is Pete Datoni."

Sidney knelt beside the body, rolled it over. He opened the shirt, grunted. "A steel vest," he said. "And with two big dents in it." He picked up the man's wrist, stripped back the glove, felt the pulse. "Dead already," he muttered. "Got too big a dose."

Sidney stripped the mask from the man's face, and Datoni's swarthy head bumped on the floor. Sidney said, holding the mask in his hands, "Well, I'll be damned! Datoni—why, it was his little girl who was tortured! You don't mean . . .?"

Hewitt grunted. "The first child we found was his step-child. Datoni doesn't have any money, but he said the extortionist asked him for five thousand dollars. Nobody would try to get money from a man who didn't have it. And there was a lot of knocking on his door with nobody there. That was an electric

bell on the chair arm. I rang it by mistake, but didn't realize it until too late. Besides, I don't think even he would have tried to keep this date at exactly the right time if he had known cops might be waiting for him. And he was the only suspect who didn't know that both Ginnis and I had seen his note saying he'd come at midnight. He must have come here earlier, disguised as a peddler, and stuck the note to the ceiling. Impressive—but he didn't know that we'd be here when it fell. That flair of his for being impressive is what got him in trouble.

"After I left here Ginnis most likely decided he'd find out what he could from Datoni, and went over. I stopped on the way and Ginnis got there first. He may have stumbled on something, or Datoni may have been afraid he wouldn't leave in time for him to pay his midnight call. So the Italian stuck him full of that fluid, as he did Sam Englehart. He had just done it when I came in, so he knocked himself on the head, waiting for a chance to get me. He almost did."

The full lips of the girl trembled slightly. "When you came in I was afraid you had been—seriously hurt."

Looking at the perfect oval of the girl's face Hewitt said, "Doc, how long before I'll be up and around?"

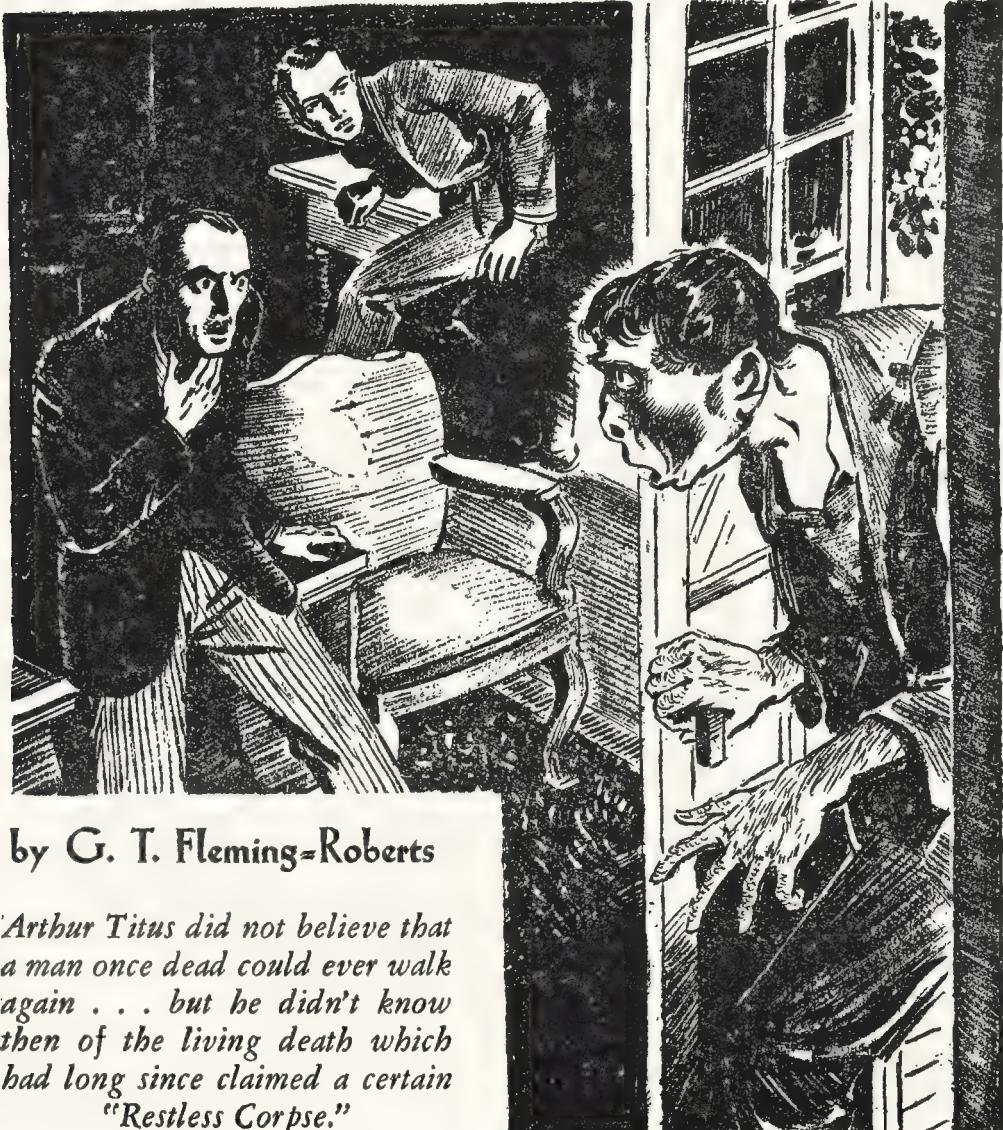
"Not long, unless your left leg is broken. I'll take you to the hospital, make an X-ray."

The girl flushed under Hewitt's steady gaze. Looking at her, Hewitt said, "I can't have a broken leg. There are things I want to be doing."

The girl looked up, smiled. "If your leg is broken," she said, "may I come and see you in the hospital, do something to repay what you've done for me?"

Hewitt caught a slow breath. "Doc," he asked, "can you break my leg?"

# THE RESTLESS CORPSE



by G. T. Fleming-Roberts

*Arthur Titus did not believe that a man once dead could ever walk again . . . but he didn't know then of the living death which had long since claimed a certain "Restless Corpse."*

ON TURNING its prow back towards the Florida coast, the launch swept by the sandy point where Arthur Titus was standing. He was very sorry at that moment to be left alone on the wet, sandy beach. Fog swallowed at the little boat until nothing re-

mained of it but the diminishing splutter of its motor.

When there was nothing more to watch seaward, Titus turned his back on the water that slapped and sucked against the sand. Smoke Island presented itself to him—a hundred yards of beach in three

directions; walls of mist in front, darkened by what must have been the shadow of the island's jungle-thick verdure—and that was all. Smoke-gray fog, sticky sand beach, sucking sea. . . .

"It's crazy," he said aloud and to no one. "Absolutely insane—this whole island and anybody who'll set foot on it!" That pronouncement was meant to include Arthur Titus, even if he was there at a price.

He sat down on his kit-bag, propped his feet on his briefcase, and waited. He was expected. Surely, they would send someone for him. But whether or no, he had firmly resolved not to set foot in the fog-draped jungle without a guide. As he sat there, he remembered his two fears—snakes and willowy, blond women.

Now, clump-shuffling through the sand, came the sound of footsteps; but he could see no one. A little shudder trickled along his spine. It is not pleasant to have eyes and not see that which you can hear, he reflected.

"Halloo-o-o there, Titus!" came a not unpleasant voice from the direction of the jungle.

Arthur Titus sprang to his feet and shouted back. Fog seemed to seal his lungs, and it was like shouting in a dream.

Someone must have heard him, though, for the footsteps came closer. Then a dark spot against the mist begot arms and legs and eventually became a man.

"I heard your boat popping, Mr. Titus," said a tall, aesthetic looking man as he extended his hand in welcome.

Titus had met Kenneth Blake once or twice in Tampa. He looked much older now, for Titus remembered him as a college youth. But then, Smoke Island could bring gray hairs over night!

Blake picked up Arthur's kit and turned towards the jungle. "We'll get started towards the house," he said. "It's not particularly a cheerful place, as you've

doubtless guessed. But this beach, the endless gray sea mingled with gray sky, it's—it's God-awful," he concluded with a shudder.

"Do we go through the woods?" Titus nodded apprehensively towards the jungle. He was thinking of snakes.

"Yes," replied Blake. "But right at the edge of the undergrowth Uncle Ralph has laid a concrete walk. It's really very pleasant walking of a morning when the fog lifts."

That was cheering. The fog did sometimes lift then, even on Smoke Island.

Titus remembered little of that walk to the house. He had a general impression of hanging moss, lichen-covered tree trunks, and a prolific growth of greenery that bled a continual sticky sweat.

"Have you been on the island long?" he asked. He was still wondering at Kenneth Blake's graying temples.

"Two days," replied the man. "Too long," he added. "Uncle Ralph sent for us—Dorothy and me. Uncle is—but you know him as well as I do."

Titus knew well Ralph Caldoun, the most detested man in his law clientele. Ralph Caldoun considered himself an aristocrat of the old school—a man generous only with himself, with a nose a-tilt for all who labored honestly for a living. Titus had also known Frank Caldoun, Ralph's brother, and had liked him. But Frank had been dead three years.

"It's about Uncle Frank's estate that Uncle Ralph called you," said Blake. There was a gentle quality in his voice when he said, "Uncle Frank." Frank Caldoun had cared for Kenneth Blake, the orphaned son of Mary Caldoun Blake, as he would have cared for a son.

At the thing that now abruptly came before his eyes through the fog, Arthur Titus gasped. It was not because of the gray stone house that suddenly thrust itself upon his vision. It was the girl who

was walking backwards towards them. Her right arm was outthrust; her fingers pointed at nothing! It was as if she moved in a trance.

"Dorothy. . . !" a fearful exclamation sprang from Blake's throat.

THE phantom wires which bound the girl were suddenly broken. She whirled, raced towards her cousin, arms outstretched, her normally beautiful face contorted with terror. Blake caught her, held her close with rough tenderness.

"What in heaven's name is the matter?" Blake's voice was jerky, and his face matched the gray of the mist.

"The hand," she sobbed. "The—the thin, white hand. It reached out and grasped—beckoned me towards—towards—" she shuddered—"towards the tomb."

Titus raised an eyebrow, looked questioningly at Blake. But Blake had eyes only for his cousin.

"There," Blake said, soothingly. "Probably it was only Guarios, the Portuguese servant. I've told you not to walk around the place alone."

The girl choked. "I know, but the house—the house frightens me. Uncle frightens me. Don't ever leave me, Ken, ever."

The gray door of the house opened. A fat colored woman pushed out onto the veranda. Seeing the frightened girl, she hurried towards them. She took Dorothy in strong, motherly arms, and led her back to the house.

Titus turned to Blake. "What. . . ?" he said.

Kenneth Blake passed his hand over his moist forehead. "I—I think her imagination, the gloom of the place, everything. . . ."

"This tomb," Arthur interrupted. "What did she mean?"

"The family vault or something behind

the house," replied the man. "I'd rather not discuss it, if you don't mind. Morbid. . . ."

Titus told himself that a perfectly normal young woman, such as Dorothy Caldoun appeared to be, was not to be frightened at nothing. However, seeing that Blake was unwilling to press the matter further, Titus questioned him no further. Pausing at the veranda, he suggested: "Suppose you go inform your uncle that I'm here. This rotten weather has fogged my brain. I'll have a pipe to clear my thoughts, outside here in the open air.

Blake complied eagerly with the suggestion. He took himself off into the house with surprising celerity.

Titus had promised himself a pipe. He filled the briar dutifully, lighted it and strolled with apparent carelessness towards the rear of the house.

As gray as the house, twice as gloomy and as silent as the moldering remains it covered, was the Caldoun vault. Its forbidding, wrought-iron door was a rust-eaten red like the yawning maw of some flesh-eating beast.

Then, Titus saw the birds. Small gray sparrows, hopping about near the door. They flurried into the air as he approached, leaving that behind which had attracted their attention. Arthur Titus stooped over and saw two things. The moss-grown flags were sprinkled with tiny white crumbs, and—he looked more closely. Immediately, he forgot about the crumbs. For dotted here and there among them were crimson spots that could only have been blood! And something told him surely that it was human blood. . . .

While his eyes told their unbelievable story, a second sense awakened. He *smelled* something. Something that was all flesh—all corruption.

He turned sharply, fled on unsteady legs towards the house. If life had been

taken, Arthur Titus knew his lips were sealed for the time. He was never a man to speak until he knew what he was saying. He knew nothing now. But he would learn. By heaven, he would learn!

**N**IIGHT was like a great, black hawk that hovered for half an hour above Smoke Island before it dropped for a final, smothering kill. Dim, home-powered electric lamps cast odd shadows and searching beams into the corners of the dark hall. Arthur Titus looked upon the portrait of Frank Caldoun as it hung against the wall of the living room, draped in dusty black crepe. Frank Caldoun, dead three years, yet his face the most cheerful thing in the room.

Tall, angularly jointed was the frame of Ralph Caldoun, present master of Smoke Island. His eyes had the knack of peeping out from beneath shaggy brows so that you were surprised when a ray of light caught them and they gleamed deep into your brain.

"I've had enough of it!" snapped Caldoun now, as he stumped up and down the room swinging his cane as if to batter the brains from anyone who stood in his path. "Money, money, money! All I've heard from those two children is money! I want to make an annuity settlement upon them, Titus, so that they will go away from here and leave me alone."

"But I thought," Arthur Titus ventured, "that Frank Caldoun left both his daughter and his nephew pretty well fixed."

Caldoun spun around. Light caught a huge, ugly cameo scarfpin mounted in his black cravat. "You keep a civil tongue in your head, young man!" he snapped. "I know what's best for 'em. You'll make out the legal papers and be damned to you!"

Titus choked back an angry reply. He walked rapidly around the room, his pipe bubbling furiously, and his attention

focused upon anything that would hold it. Hanging against one black oak panel was a long Spanish knife, its rust-stained point tilted upwards. He stared at it.

"Uh-where did you get this knife?" he asked, more to keep his temper than for any other reason.

"Old family relic," Caldoun spat out. "You know the legend. One Caldoun in every generation dies by the knife."

Titus raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know it," he said evenly. "But why keep the thing around, then? Strong for family legends, aren't you?" He turned savagely towards Caldoun. "I'll be damned if I'll do it!"

"Eh-eh? Do what, you young whipper-snapper?" growled Caldoun.

"Make out your legal papers," replied Titus lightly. "I'm through. You can find another lawyer."

The cheeks of the older man flamed. Oaths coughed from his throat. Then, he caught his anger. His tone became cold as snow.

"Very well," he said. "I hope you've had a pleasant evening at my expense. You may send a radiogram for your boat and leave at once."

Titus stepped close to the man and looked fearlessly into the flashing eyes. "I don't think so," he said, quietly. "When I send a radiogram from this house it will be to the police!"

Caldoun paled. He raised his cane above his head as if he intended to break the lawyer's skull. "You—you. . . ." he sputtered, and became speechless.

"Many a skeleton rattles in the Caldoun closet," Titus whispered.

The words had barely left his lips when the door of the study was thrown open. Frightened-faced, Kenneth Blake sprang into the room. "A doctor," he panted. "Quick! Oh, God!" He collapsed in a chair, his thin fingers masking his face.

Titus sprang to Blake's side and, seiz-

ing him by the shoulder, shook him angrily. "What's the matter with you," he snapped.

"Dorothy," Blake murmured. "In the hall . . . the *damned thing* . . ."

The lawyer turned quickly and ran from the room. Slower, stumping along, came Ralph Caldoun.

As soon as he entered the darkened hall, Titus noticed, faintly lingering in the air, the same odor that he had smelled that afternoon by the Caldoun vault. It was the odor of flesh—and corruption! Dorothy was lying limply over the arm of a chair. Her face was milk-white.

"What's the matter with my niece? What's the matter. . . ." A peculiar form of consternation had crept into Ralph Caldoun's tone.

Titus was bending over the girl, chafing her hands. "Fainted," he snapped. "Get me some liquor."

"Guarios!" shouted Caldoun. "Guarios! Damn the man! Where's he gone?"

"Don't stand there bellowing!" Titus barked. "Get some liquor. Are you lame?"

Caldoun's eyes flashed. "Give orders in my house, eh? I'll show—"

He broke off as the fat Negro woman whom Titus had seen earlier in the evening, pushed through the hall door. Her frightened eyes dropped to the still, white form of Dorothy Caldoun.

"Lawdy," she gasped. "What done happen, Mistah Caldoun?"

"Martha, get some wine from the cellar," Caldoun ordered.

The woman's eyes whitened. "Me, sah? Me go down dat cellah? No, sah! Not alone, I won't!"

Titus straightened up. "I'll go, Martha. Caldoun, watch the girl. I'll get the wine. Martha, show me the way."

"Yes, sah," the Negro woman mumbled, bobbing off towards the kitchen. "Ain't no 'lectricity down thah," she explained. She pressed a match on the hot

top of the wood stove and applied its flame to a candle. "Tha's why I don' like goin' down thah, noways. . . ."

**T**ITUS followed her down the moist, stone steps, through a stone archway into a labyrinthian cellar.

"This way to the wine, mistah. . . ."

Then she stopped in her tracks. The candle flame shuddered.

"Lawd!" she moaned. She screamed gutturally, dropped the candle and fled back up the stairs. The lawyer tried to catch at her skirts, but the ecliptic darkness made him stumble. He caught his balance. His shaking fingers found a match and struck it. He nursed the tiny flame and held the splinter high above his head.

Then he saw what had brought the scream from Martha. Lying on the floor, a grinning, crimson wound across the throat, was the body of a man!

Titus thought quickly. He knelt, looked long and searchingly into the dead face. The man had features unmistakably Latin. The match flame burned to the lawyer's fingers. He struck another. Yellow flame flashed across the right palm of the corpse. It was stained darkly, a brown-red. Rust, thought Titus, red iron rust. . . .

Titus twisted to his feet and turned towards the stair. Then, he saw that which prickled the hair on the back of his neck. Walking slowly towards him was—but it was unthinkable, unnamable!

It was something that had once been human, but now bore the appearance of a living corpse wrapped in grave clothes. It moved slowly, yet with fearful determination. The face was white almost to the point of phosphorescence . . . the scaly white skin so stretched that every contour of the skull could be clearly seen. It came towards Titus, skeleton hands with cramped, bony fingers outstretched.

And with the specter came the smell of filth and rottenness.

A small scream scraped across Titus' throat. The match burned down, adding the smell of scorched flesh to the odor of corruption. Darkness smothered him. He ducked his head and fled blindly through blackness.

By some miracle, he stumbled up the stone steps. One terrified glance over his shoulder and he scrambled into the kitchen.

He burst into the hall like a madman. The Negro woman was sobbing out her story. Titus, in order to appear unruffled, forced himself to a calm. He did not know all—yet.

"It was dat Dago man, Guarios," the woman sobbed. "Mastah Caldoun, he am as daid as daid. Oh Lawsy, Ah's goin' to leave dis house. Ah's—"

"Stop!" Caldoun ordered. "Where's that idiot of a lawyer?"

"He's right there," Kenneth Blake, who, in the meantime, had managed to revive Dorothy, replied.

Caldoun stared at white-faced Arthur Titus. "You," he laughed, "look as though you've seen a ghost."

"I have!" declared Titus. "And I saw your man, Guarios, on the floor down there. His throat was slashed! Does that coincide with your family legend, Caldoun?"

Caldoun laughed, checked his untimely humor and said, "Guarios was a fine man. Worked well. Asked no questions. . . ."

Titus cut in: "I will ask questions. What do you intend to do about it, Caldoun? I suggest a radio message to the police. The sooner proper authorities take charge here the better."

Caldoun's eyes narrowed. He walked slowly, threateningly, towards the lawyer. "You forget I am master here," he said. He allowed steely eyes to glitter through overhanging brows. "Always, men die.

Guarios will be given a decent burial on this island—tonight. Kenneth and you, Titus, will assist."

Dorothy Caldoun tore herself from Kenneth's arms and ran pleading to her uncle. "Uncle Ralph," she cried, "you would never do such a thing! Guarios is entitled to more than decent burial. He is entitled to the vengeance of justice. Whoever or whatever killed him must be found."

"What do you mean by that last statement?" Titus rapped. "Miss Caldoun, what frightened you here in the hall tonight?"

A visible shudder passed over the girl's slender figure. "I—I do not know," she answered. "It was a dead thing. It walked in from the kitchen, and stood looking at me through great, flaming eyes. It did not try to come close to me—only stood there, muttering."

"What did it say?" Titus insisted.

The girl's brow furrowed. "I am not sure, but I think it called me by name. I think it said, 'Dorothy Caldoun, it is yours, all. . . .' And I can remember no more."

"Did you notice a peculiar smell?" Titus asked.

"Will you stop pestering her!" Blake snapped. "Don't you see that she is sick?"

"No—no, Kenneth. I want to help all I can," said the girl. "Yes, Mr. Titus, there was a smell, a foul smell that seemed to come with it. . . ."

Titus' head snapped up and down. "That's enough," he said. "Step this way, all of you, Caldoun, we'll talk this over sensibly. There are more 'legends' than the one concerning the Spanish knife to be discussed."

**H**IS decisive manner caused them all—even Caldoun—for the moment to obey him. They walked in hesitant, single file into the black, oak-lined living room

with its dismal hangings and the dangerous Spanish knife that was poised against the paneled wall. Ralph Caldoun swung his lanky frame around so quickly that the light dashed yellow rays from the ugly tiger-eye scarfpin, in a manner that matched the glitter of his eyes. He glared at Blake and stared Dorothy Caldoun out of countenance. But his eyes met sterner stuff when they flashed to Arthur Titus' face.

"Well," Caldoun growled, "a lawyer always asks idiotic questions."

"To begin with," said Titus, "I'd like to know how Dorothy's father, Frank Caldoun, died. The details of his death were hushed up with remarkable speed directly after. Did he, by any chance, die of a very terrible disease?"

A cruel smile flitted across Caldoun's face. "Terrible, indeed! Throat trouble!"

White-faced Kenneth Blake spoke up: "That's a lie! Uncle Frank hanged? If he was, it was stark murder! No finer man—"

"Tut!" Caldoun interrupted sharply. "Who's speaking of hanging?" He pointed mutely to the Spanish knife on the wall.

"Stabbed? Then my father was murdered?" asked Dorothy, hesitantly.

Caldoun leered at his niece, dashed his forefinger across his throat. "From ear to ear!"

Cruel as were his verbal blows, the girl controled her emotion. Not so with Kenneth Blake. A damning curse tripped from his tongue. He leaped across the room, seized his uncle's throat in his delicate fingers, and did his best to strangle the man.

"Young whelp!" Caldoun snarled. He whirled his cane and brought it down sharply on Blake's shoulders, even before Titus intervened.

Titus pushed his stalky form between the two men. "There'll be neither

throttling nor thrashing tonight," he said, sternly. "Unless I have to do it."

Livid with anger, Caldoun took two steps backward, raised his cane again, measured Titus' frame—then wisely saved the blow.

"Has it occurred to you," said Titus, calmly, "that Guarios died of the same 'throat trouble' that Frank Caldoun was afflicted with?"

"It had not," replied Caldoun, thoughtfully. "But—" he waved the matter aside—"many a Portuguese has died from a knife wound, I'll wager."

"How did the legend of the knife, the curse, or whatever it is, originate?" Titus persisted. "Don't you see, I'm trying to find some explanation for the spectral thing Dorothy saw."

Caldoun shrugged. "I am inclined to quote, 'A bit of underdone potato or a blot of mustard.'"

Titus jerked his head sideways. "No, it won't do. Indigestion affects people differently. I believe Dorothy saw exactly what she claims to have seen."

Blake looked fearfully at the lawyer. "Why?" he asked.

Titus shuddered slightly. "Because," he said slowly, "I saw it, too. It was down there in the basement with the body of Guarios. It was apparently human, but had certain unearthly qualities. A death's-head for a face, skin that glowed with almost phosphorescent light, and carrying with it a stench of flesh too long withheld from the grave!"

Fear, hate and rage combined in a hideous grimace on Caldoun's face. He seized a table for support. There came a flash of blue—and the lights in the house went out!

For a moment the darkness was choking. Then Dorothy screamed. Titus leaped across the room in the direction of the girl. In his attempt to aid her he only startled her the more.

"Take it easy," he reassured her. "A fuse must have blown. Wait, I'll strike a match."

The girl clung tightly to his left arm while he groped for the match he could not find.

"Stand still," he ordered. "I'll go bring a light from the kitchen."

"No—no," the girl pleaded softly. "Don't leave me here. I'm afraid...."

"Blake," Titus snapped.

No answer.

"Blake!" the lawyer repeated sharply. "Either bring a light or watch your cousin while I get one. I say, Blake!"

Still clutching the girl, Titus pivoted. In the hall a flickering wisp of light was moving towards them. "You, Caldoun?" Titus called.

Tensely he watched the nearing candle flame. Then he saw that it was carried neither by Blake nor Caldoun. Fat Martha, the Negro cook shuffled into the room and raised the candle above her bandanna-covered head. Her eyes were a startled white. The candle-stick trembled. A prayer stumbled from her lips. Her shaking brown finger pointed at the carpet.

**T**TITUS turned his head. Involuntarily, he jerked at Dorothy's arm. "Don't turn around," he cautioned. "Martha, take Miss Dorothy out of here at once."

Wide-eyed with terror, the girl stared into Titus' face. "Has something happened?" she breathed.

"I'm afraid so," said Titus. "But I don't know yet just what...." He really meant that he could not tell whether the crooked circle of blood he had seen on the carpet where Martha pointed, flowed from Ralph Caldoun or Kenneth Blake....

He forced Dorothy into the arms of the negress. Taking the candle, he crossed the room to a wall bracket, and lighted a

taper. He returned the candle to the cook and again ordered her to take Dorothy from the room.

Then Titus turned his attention to the gruesome, yellow-lighted scene before him. Ralph Caldoun lay behind the davenport, his long legs making crooked shadows on the floor. The man was moaning softly. Titus hurried to him, but the flickering candle-light failed to reveal any sort of a wound. He shook the tall man by the shoulder. Caldoun opened his eyes and sat up like a man awakening from a deep sleep.

"The knife," Caldoun muttered hoarsely. "Did you see it, Titus? My God! It moved through the air without any means of support, I tell you. The Spanish knife! But for the grace of heaven, the prophesy would have been fulfilled upon my person. Look!"

He pointed a shaking finger high up at the paneled wall. The black oak was beaded with red droplets that were crawling from the newly-crimsoned blade of the Spanish knife. Caldoun clutched Titus' shoulder. "Don't you understand?"

Titus shook his head. "I don't," he said. He was trying to make his voice sound dry.

"No human hand could have taken that knife from the wall. Don't you see that it hangs fully thirteen feet from the floor?"

Suddenly, Titus remembered Blake. Blood on the floor had come from somewhere, from someone....

He left Caldoun sitting on the floor, walked gingerly towards the darkening stain on the carpet. But his eyes shifted suddenly to a crumpled mass of arms and legs dumped behind a chair. It was the body of Kenneth Blake; and in his throat was a grinning, red wound!

Caldoun turned fear-quenched eyes on the body of Kenneth Blake. His lips formed the question, "Who?"

Thoughts burned across Titus' mind. Motive! Ralph Caldoun had motive enough for killing Blake. Frank Caldoun had left money in trust with his brother Ralph to take care of Dorothy and Kenneth Blake. Where wealth was concerned, Ralph Caldoun threw scruples to the winds. Then, another picture formed in Titus' imagination. He could see through the whole scheme now. If his convictions were correct, Ralph Caldoun was the most heartless criminal unhung. He pointed an accusing finger at Caldoun.

"I want to search you," he demanded.

Caldoun paled. "You think that I would kill my own flesh and blood?"

Arthur Titus felt his muscles knotting. "I believe you have committed a crime far worse than murder. Will you put up peaceably with my searching you, or shall I knock you down?"

Caldoun shrugged. "If you must be an ass . . . . and the weapon is on the wall above your head. . . ."

"Too far above my head," Titus interrupted. "No human hand could have touched the thing, as you have said."

He approached Caldoun and ran his fingers carefully over the man, turning his pockets inside out and examining the linings of his sleeves. Caldoun watched with frozen contempt in his eyes. He found nothing.

Titus stood back, letting his eyes wander about the room. The floor was carpeted to the wall. Three scatter rugs offered the only place of possible concealment beside the drawers of the table. He went first to the table and examined it. No hidden knife. Then he ripped back the three rugs. Still no knife—but something else. Wires leading to the table lamp had been scraped bare of insulation. The exposed metal was blackened by the heat of the short circuit. The lights had not gone out by accident. A heel-plate on somebody's shoe would have put the

whole system out of order in a second.

Titus shoved the table over to the wall beneath the suspended Spanish knife. From the top of the table, he could see a cavity in the handle from which the "blood" had been permitted to flow. The knife was supported on a pivot. He remembered that when he first saw it, its tip had pointed ceiling-ward. Someone could have touched the knife with something long—say a cane—tilted it in the opposite direction, and the red fluid would have coursed down its edge.

He got down from the table, wondering, as he did so, if his case would stand in court. He doubted it. There was no weapon and—

His thoughts broke off abruptly at a choked gasp from Caldoun. Titus swung around on the balls of his feet. All meditated action seeped from his nerves and left his muscles limp. The wide casement windows had been flung back as if by an invisible hand! Damp night air wafted in gray mist, the smell of dripping foliage and—the *stench of death*.

**T**HE figure that stepped through the window was tall. Ragged clothes were earth-stained. Scaly fingers, death-whitened, dangled from ripped sleeves. The face was white. Scabrous skin stretched so tightly that the features were like those of a death's-head. Eyes gleamed redly from two dark pits.

Caldoun's hands checked a scream in his throat. The livid lips of the living corpse parted in a skull's grin, displaying ragged teeth and receding gums. A voice groaned from a hollow breast: "Embrace me, brother. . . ."

Caldoun was riveted to the spot. And Titus could understand the man's terror, for he could move no more than Caldoun. Titus watched the spectral figure advance, saw the skeleton fingers crooking at Caldoun's throat. Caldoun backed

towards the wall, his movements jerky and mechanical. The moisture of fear beaded upon his forehead.

The phantom lunged forward. Sharp, bony fingers imbedded themselves in Caldoun's neck. Caldoun's cry gurgled in his throat. Then, Titus saw the knife!

Caldoun's right hand stabbed out, drove upward, and caught at the cameo in his tie. A ten-inch knife of razor steel flashed from the lining of Caldoun's tie.

Twice, the knife hacked out. Blood spurted along the almost transparent skin of the cadaverous creature. The bony talons straightened. The creature staggered backwards, clutching at its throat.

Titus threw himself towards the bleeding thing. Again, came the hollow voice:

"Stand back. I have . . . robbed the grave . . . too long. . . . Stand back . . . back. I am . . . unclean. . . ."

The tall figure in grave clothes swayed slightly and toppled backwards.

Titus whirled around. The bloody knife had slipped from Caldoun's hand. He had dropped into a chair and the whole of his lank body was quivering.

Titus' nerves were cold, his body calm.

"I hope," he said earnestly, "that you will suffer the same tortures that you brought upon your brother."

Titus pointed to the corpse-faced thing on the floor. "Deny that *that* is your brother;" he snapped. "I suspected as much when I saw birds eating bread crumbs scattered around the door of the vault. You had kept your brother Frank a living corpse among the dead. You fed him yourself, poking food through the door of the vault.

"Then, Guarios discovered your secret. Rust stains on his hand lead me to believe that he liberated your brother from the tomb. So you killed Guarios. To the world, Frank Caldoun was dead. You controlled his wealth. But you knew that

if Kenneth Blake and Dorothy Caldoun ever claimed what was theirs by rights, you would be penniless. So you brought them here to kill them—brought me as a witness that their death had come about by supernatural means.

"When you had put the lights out, you smothered Blake's mouth with one hand and slit his throat with the knife in your tie. You had rigged up the knife on the wall and the story about the curse in the family, in order to frighten me into believing that death had come to Blake and Guarios through supernatural means. But why didn't you, a born Cain, kill your brother long ago?"

"I—I hated him," Caldoun stuttered, all resistance gone. "He made so much money, and all that I had he had given me. It was charity. It—it hurt. He was taken sick when we were in the Orient. I bribed a doctor to write a death certificate and smuggled Frank back on a tramp steamer."

"Then," Titus interrupted, "you brought him to this island, forced him to live in the tomb so that you might watch him rot away. God! What a death!"

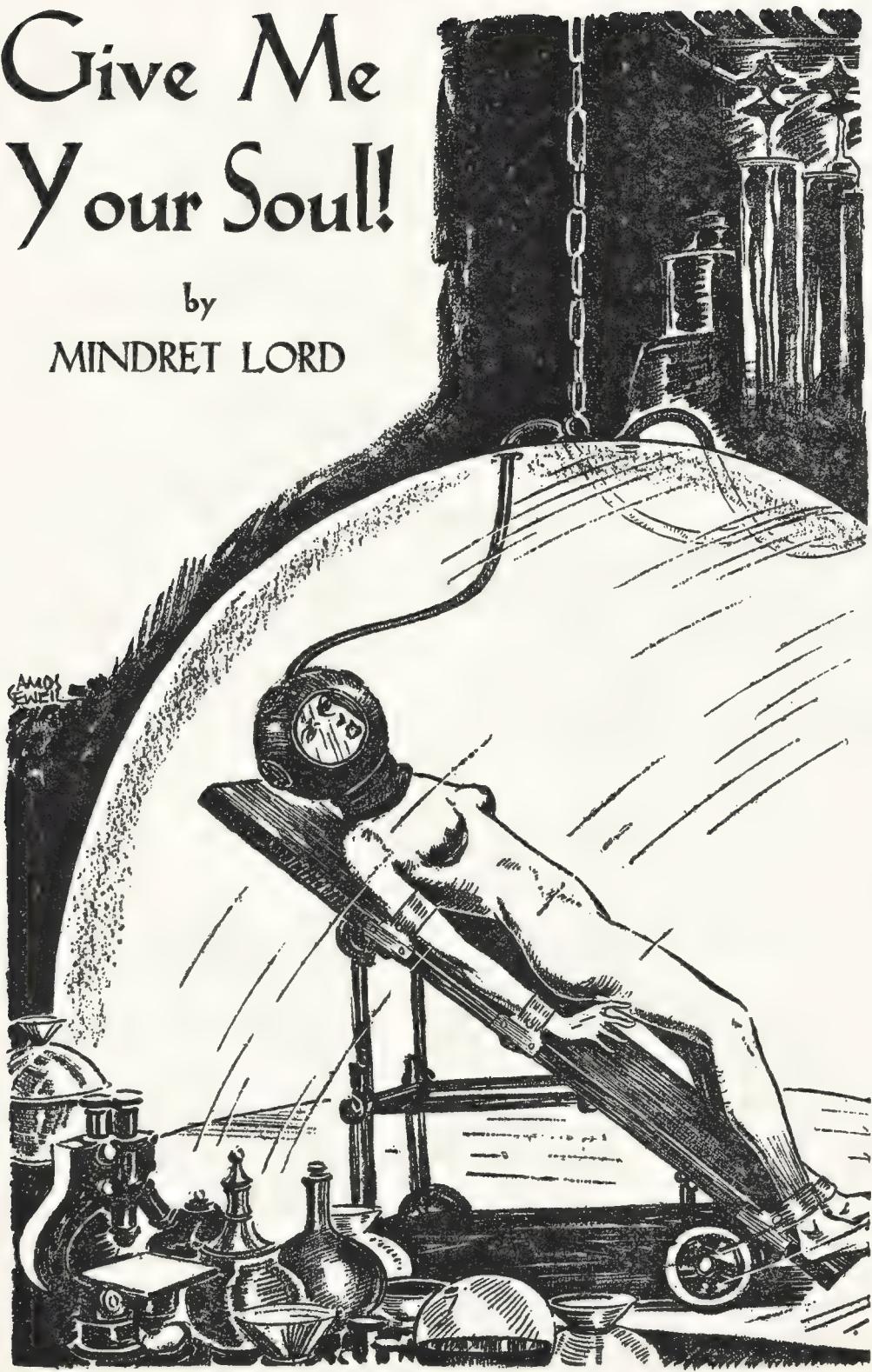
Titus looked shudderingly at the body of Frank Caldoun. "The living death," he breathed. "Leprosy. I should have known by the odor of decay and the white, rotting skin. . . ."

**M**ORNING, and a low, black police launch was moored off Smoke Island. Cloaked like ghosts, medical men carried three stiff, sheeted forms to the boat. Handcuffed, his spirit quenched of fire, Ralph Caldoun stepped to the launch.

And as he did so, a warm tropic breeze sprang out of the south. Fog and morning mist swept aside. As if an evil spirit, long pervading the island, had been removed, Smoke Island appeared as a sparkling emerald floating in a sea of lapis lazuli.

# Give Me Your Soul!

by  
MINDRET LORD



# EERIE NOVELETTE OF THE FORBIDDEN WORLD!

*Out of a nameless, unremembered past, she came to him, bringing with her a strange, new happiness—and a terror sufficient to warp and shrivel the soul!*

**I**F, in this account, you expect a half hour's idle amusement, put it down. This is not meant for you. Herein you will find none of the story-teller's tricks to interest, to delight, to frighten. Indeed, this is no story. Hopeless though it may be, it is a direct and anguished appeal to whom chance brings these words. It is a question . . .

\* \* \*

In 1931 I took my doctor's degree at the Sorbonne and returned to England. I found a little house in the quiet village of Bushey Heath in Hertfordshire where, for the next year or two, I intended to live while I devoted myself to the study of abnormal psychology, for it was in this field that I desired to make my pro-



fessional career. I was to come into contact with such abnormality as even Freud or Kraft-Ebing never dreamed of. Monsters of abnormality can be found in the case-records of such scientists, but they are nothing to compare with that creature of mad horror, Dr. Abram Blystein.

At about eleven o'clock one night, some six months after I had taken my house in Bushey Heath, I was suddenly startled by a furious banging at my door. I hastened to open it and found there a number of villagers who carried among them two young women; both apparently badly injured. I had them carried in and laid on couches in my living room and as I started to examine them, one of the men explained that there had been an automobile accident on the Great North Road.

One of the young women was unconscious from what I assumed to be a fracture of the skull. The other, however, though weak was entirely conscious and quite astonishingly calm. So calm, in fact, that for a moment I was inclined to think that the blood which soaked the sleeve of her jacket and dripped from her hand must be that of her companion. It was not until I cut off the sleeve that I discovered that a large artery in her arm had been severed. The blood was flowing in the spurts characteristic of such wounds and it was all too evident that already she had lost much more blood than she could afford.

"How long ago did this happen?" I asked.

"About half an hour," answered one of the men. "We had some trouble getting them out of the wreck."

When I had bound a tourniquet tightly about the arm above the elbow, I asked the girl, "Do you know if you have been hurt elsewhere?"

She replied in a tone of casual, polite conversation. "I rather think you will find my leg is broken."

It took only a moment to ascertain that her fears were justified.

"Can you stand the pain?" I asked. "Would you like me to give you an injection of morphine?"

She smiled. "Don't bother. It is a nuisance—but I'm able to put up with it for a while, at least."

It is not an uncommon occurrence that one who has been injured in a violent and shocking manner feels no pain until a quieter nervous condition has been restored, and this is what I supposed the case to be. It was not until some months later that I discovered how wrong I was.

I now turned my attention to the unconscious girl upon the other couch and quickly realized that there was nothing to be done. She had been so badly mangled that I knew she could not live many minutes more, so, aware of the futility of any effort in her behalf, I returned once again to her companion. A hasty examination convinced me that without an immediate blood transfusion she, too, would very shortly die.

I turned to the villagers who were huddled together at one end of the room with helpless, sickly expressions on their faces and explained the situation. One of them, a lad of twenty or so, hesitantly agreed to the donation of some of his blood.

I proceeded with the operation at once. As I connected the necessary apparatus, my patient asked, "Is she dead?"

I shook my head.

"Will she live?"

"No," I said. "I'm sorry." I glanced at her face to see how she had taken this news and was astonished to observe that she was smiling. It seemed a strange expression in such a situation.

When the transfusion was completed I sent the lad into my bedroom to lie and rest for awhile. Though I would have liked to have kept her quiet, my patient insisted that I tell her exactly what was

her position. As gently as I could I informed her that she could not be moved for at least a fortnight and that she might not be up for over a month.

**S**HE closed her eyes and seemed to be considering her plight. When she looked up again she had apparently arrived at some decision. "I think I'll accept your offer of morphine, Doctor," she said. "I suppose you'll want to set my leg, now, anyway?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then before you give me the hypodermic," she continued, "you can save me a lot of bother by letting me give you the information the police will want. I don't wish to be annoyed by them now or later. My name is Aline Ross. I live at 9 Cambridge Gate, Regent's Park, London. I am twenty-one years old, British, and without known relations."

I was making notes of what she told me.

"About the girl with me, I know nothing, whatever. I picked her up on the roadside in St. Albans. She told me she had been waiting for a Green Line bus to London. Further than that we didn't talk. I never saw her before and know absolutely nothing concerning her. I think that is as much as I can offer to satisfy official curiosity. Now, if you please, Doctor, the morphine."

As I made the injection I found myself wondering again at the almost superhuman calm of the girl and I was conscious of an uneasy feeling that there was something here that was not quite right. Something subtle but vitally important that I could not isolate. If in that moment of doubt I had been able to perceive that power of tragedy and horror which motivated my patient, from what vile torments could I have saved us both!

If you are to understand how I became entangled in the web which was being

spun by that spider, that tarantula among men, Dr. Blystein, I must make this record detailed and complete. In the first place, the physical beauty of Aline Ross was by no means an accidental part of the scheme. She was a decoy—a lure. In repose, her face made one think of Helen of Troy, as, in outline, she has been represented by Flaxman. Yet I do not mean that her expression held the hard, cold dignity of a Grecian statue, for in spite of the halo of golden curls that framed her face; despite the deep, still blue of her eyes, there was a vital warmth about her which reminded me of Mary receiving into her arms the body of her Son descended from the Cross.

It was a mingling of pain, resignation and *intention*—as of one who moves not for himself, but to do the bidding of his master.

Aline's poor passenger had died before the police arrived. When they came Aline had lost consciousness and while I busied myself with the setting of her broken leg I passed on to them the information she had given me. As she had foreseen, this seemed to satisfy them and presently they left, carrying with them the dead girl.

Only by looking back on the three months that followed can I see the peculiarities of that period; for the changes which took place before my eyes were very gradual. In perspective, however, it is possible to observe much that goes unnoticed at the time.

Aline's return to health was slower than I had hoped, and I had to continue the blood transfusions until a total of six quarts had been pumped into her heart, all of it from the one, original donor who was a strong vigorous lad. Once he had discovered that he suffered no ill-effects from the experience, he had been more than willing to let me drain additional quantities from his veins as I perceived Aline's need. I say that he suffered no

ill-effects, and by this I mean that *physically* it did him no apparent harm. But in another way, the boy was completely transformed.

From being a simple, likable village lad, he became so mean and cruel that even his dog abandoned him and attached itself to Aline, refusing to leave her side for an instant. At the time, it seemed to me that the change in the boy was no affair of mine, and even in the light of after events—only one of which was his conviction and hanging for the brutal murder of his mother—I still must hold myself innocent, except in so far as I was the unconscious instrument of Dr. Abram Blystein.

**J**UST as great a change was noticeable in Aline. That cold, dispassionate calm that, at first, had been so marked in her actions and appearance, gradually diminished. She became so ethereally sweet, so gracious and so devoted that I counted myself the luckiest of mortals to have captured her affections, for she had agreed to be my wife so soon as her health and strength were fully restored.

Often talked of our lives before our meeting. Now, in these conversations I achieved a thorough understanding of both the trivial and vital circumstances of her life, up to January, 1930. At first I was not aware of the peculiarity that none of her reminiscences continued beyond this period; but what, in the beginning, I took for coincidence, slowly assumed a mysterious, towering importance.

Thus, when I would ask concerning the present whereabouts of some friend whom she had been describing, I would always find her ignorant of any detail after the date I have mentioned. At last I arrived at the conclusion that her reticence concerning that period must be actuated either by a complete lapse of memory or by a desire to keep the whole

of that time a secret. Finally, when I asked her flatly if there were any single thing, any incident or person or experience, which she could remember after January, 1930, she was much more surprised than I to discover the complete blank in her memory.

Besides my natural scientific desire to restore the lost year to her memory, it became imperative for me to do so when I considered that in that forgotten period she might have been married to another man. So I was forced to begin an investigation which led to the ultimate horrors of a living nightmare. Would God I had let well enough alone!

For several weeks I labored to restore Aline's memory to her, but my attempts were totally unsuccessful. Finally it was Aline who suggested that I interview the estate agents from whom she had leased her apartment in town. Also, she gave me a key to the place and asked me to go through whatever papers or records I found there.

Early the next morning—it was May twenty-ninth—I drove to London and began my quest. Her estate agents could tell me nothing helpful, so I went on to her apartment at Cambridge Gate. I examined the richly decorated rooms with great care, but until I opened her desk I had brought to light nothing which could further my purpose. There lay a small, black leather memorandum book. Except for one page, which was filled with names and addresses, the rest of the leaves were empty. And this was all that the entire apartment offered that might be of any conceivable use to me.

As a drowning man clings to a straw, so did my despairing hopes clutch at the contents of that little book. On the page were ten names, seven feminine. The addresses were widely scattered over London and its suburbs and, so far as I knew, seemed mostly to be in the poorer dis-

tricts. I called Aline on the telephone and read to her the list of names. But try as she might, she could recall nothing concerning them, and was even ventured that the book was not hers, but had been left in her apartment by some forgotten visitor.

I hung up and sat staring at the open book. Suddenly I was convinced that two of the names were familiar to me. I racked my brains to think how. And then in a paralyzing flash of memory, the tragic context in which I had seen those names returned to me. Jane Murray and Diana Welford were the names of two girls who had disappeared from their homes in the same week, in the summer of 1930. It had caused a newspaper sensation and accusations had been made that a white slavery business was being conducted under our very noses. But in spite of the hue and cry, no trace of the girls was ever found.

Though sick at heart, I decided to go on with my investigation. I visited three of the addresses which lay in the general direction of Bushey Heath. I learned only that the people I sought had given up or abandoned their rooms in the Fall of 1930. They had all been strangers in London and no one had been particularly curious about their vanishing.

It was in a state of black foreboding that I drove up to my door. After dinner I showed Aline the book, and she readily admitted that the names and addresses were written in her hand. But she still denied any knowledge of the book and its contents!

Knowing Aline as I did, I felt absolutely certain of her innocence in whatever thing it was that I had unearthed. I asked myself what it was. Simple kidnapping for ransom? Hardly, considering the probable financial state of the people I had visited and the absence of grieving relatives and friends. White slavery?

Then what of the three men on the list? Some peculiar kind of espionage? Pure coincidence? My thoughts led nowhere.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Faceless One

AT DAWN I arose feeling more tired than I had when I went to bed. There was no sound in the house, as Aline and my servant were probably still asleep. I decided to take a walk across the field before breakfast and chose from my closet an old tweed coat which I had not worn since the last time I had wandered over the countryside, a couple of months before. As I drew it on, I felt something hard in the inside breast pocket. It was a stamped envelope addressed to a Dr. Abram Blystein in the handwriting of Aline. I frowned, puzzled. Then suddenly I remembered. Following the accident, when I was starting out on just such a walk as I now planned to take, she had given me this letter to mail for her, but I had returned to the house without having seen a post box and had hung up my coat without remembering the envelope it contained.

So far as I knew it might be the only existing link between Aline's present and the year just past, unless Dr. Blystein might turn out to be an acquaintance of before that time. But my observation had convinced me that Aline's aphasia had come upon her early in her convalescence.

When I returned I found Aline awake and immediately showed her the letter, explaining how it was still in my possession. Her attitude bore out my theory concerning the beginning of her loss of memory, for she insisted that she had no faintest recollection of writing the letter, or of the person to whom it was addressed. This, of course, was exactly what I had hoped. At last I had the name and address of someone with whom she was actually in touch during the forgotten

period. Together we opened the envelope and read the single sheet it contained:

DEAR DR. BLYSTEIN:

It is just over a week since you last heard from me and I hope that the delay I may have caused in your work has not been a serious inconvenience.

After having spent several unsuccessful days in St. Albans, I finally made contact, but I had an automobile accident while I was bringing her down to Penzance, with the result that she is dead and I have a broken leg and various other minor injuries.

However, the incident may not be so bad as it seems, as I am the patient of a man who answers your requirements in every detail. He lives alone, has no relatives in England (or elsewhere, so far as I know) is intimate with no one, has no dependents and no practice. If he conducts any correspondence, I have so far seen no evidence of it. You will find his name and address below.

The doctor tells me I shall not be able to be of any use for between two and three months, but, of course, if you should decide to utilize my host I may be able to provide some assistance in spite of my temporary invalidism.

Please let me hear from you by return post.

Very truly yours,

P. S. In the accident I lost a lot of blood and had to have a transfusion. Very soon afterward I began to feel my memory was growing hazy. Could there be any connection? I can't quite understand it, because I seem to remember things that happened ages ago more clearly than I have in a long time. But I actually had to think to remember your address. I wonder why?

When we finished reading I saw in Aline's troubled gaze only innocent wonder. Without asking, I knew that she remembered nothing concerning it; that, very possibly, she was even more in the dark than I. I was now certain that both she and Dr. Abram Blystein were definitely connected with the disappearances of the people I had vainly tried to find.

I provided evasive, reassuring answers

to Aline's questions, and then, leaving her with the dog I started off on my interrupted walk. I tried to consider the problem from every possible angle and finally came to the realization that, outside of the bare fact of the disappearances, there was no smallest bit of evidence to indicate either purpose or motive. My very ignorance reassured me. For, while there was nothing to show that Dr. Blystein and Aline had not kidnapped the missing persons for some obscure, terrible reason; there was also nothing to show that they had not vanished of their own free will, and that Aline's connection with them had not been greatly to their benefit.

I imagined all sorts of ways in which a kindly, rich old doctor might make it his hobby to help and provide for friendless strangers, and felt that I was not far from an accurate appraisal of the whole business.

I RETURNED home in high spirits and I asked Aline if she felt equal to coming with me to pay Dr. Blystein a visit. Aline seemed delighted at the prospect of meeting Dr. Blystein immediately. She hoped and believed that the sight of this person whom she had known in the period of her lapse of memory would restore to her all the details of that time. So, with love in our hearts and a high confidence in the future, we blithely started off on our disastrous mission.

In Penzance when we came in view of the old, rambling, stone structure, set in the middle of spacious grounds, Aline stopped and surveyed it with a worried expression. I asked her if she recollects ever having seen it before. She did not answer at once, but continued to gaze in silence and I had to repeat my question.

"No," she finally answered, "I don't actually remember anything about the place; but—I am terribly afraid."

"Afraid?" I inquired, "Of what?"

"I don't know," she said hesitantly; "but let's go away. I don't want to go into that house." In spite of the warm afternoon sun, I saw she was shivering.

"But what is there to be afraid of?" I protested. "What they may be able to tell us means so much to us. We can't afford not to go and I am sure there is no cause for fear. Don't forget I shall be there by your side—in case there is anything."

She smiled at me apologetically and took my arm. "I suppose I am silly," she said. "Come on, then!"

The door was opened by a tall, powerful looking man in a white linen coat. As he glanced at Aline I thought I saw a flicker of interest or recognition flash across his cold, impassive face. I gave him my card and told him that we wished to see Dr. Blystein. He ushered us into the hall and left us, saying that he would see if the doctor was not engaged.

Aline, I realized, was having difficulty in controlling her nerves. Her apprehension had visibly increased. I encouraged her as best I could until the doctor's assistant returned. The doctor was busy in his laboratory, and anyhow could not break his rule to see no one except by appointment. I hastened to explain the reason for our visit.

"She doesn't remember Dr. Blystein, then?" asked the assistant.

"No," I said, "but I hope she will when she sees him."

"If that is so," said the assistant, "would you mind telling me what proof you have that the young lady is known to Dr. Blystein?"

I was somewhat annoyed by the insolence of the assistant's question. Anger made me do what otherwise I should never have done. I pulled Aline's letter from my pocket and threw it across the table.

"There," I said, "is a letter Miss Ross wrote to Dr. Blystein three months ago. I forgot to mail it. It is self explanatory. It introduces me and I insist upon knowing the reason why."

With a sudden change of manner, he picked up the letter and glanced at it. Then, without a word, he hurried from the room. In a very few moments the door re-opened to admit Dr. Blystein, immediately followed by his assistant who, as the doctor walked forward to meet us in the middle of the room, remained standing by the door.

I DON'T know what picture I had built up in my mind of how I expected Dr. Blystein to look; but no matter how ghastly I might have imagined him my vision must have fallen far short of reality. There is something about a face that has been burnt or crushed or eaten by disease out of all semblance to itself which inspires the observer with a thrill of horror and, peculiarly, embarrassment.

It is not enough to say that the entire left side of his face and head had been burnt with fire—it had been consumed. In that fraction of time before I had been able to turn my eyes away, I had been unable to avoid observing the twisted and tortured scar tissue that partly covered the vacant eye socket, that corner of the mouth from which the lips had vanished, leaving in their place a grinning hole. And somehow more shocking still was the entire absence of any sign that an ear had ever grown on that side . . .

Instinctively I reached for Aline's hand. "I am Dr. Blystein," he said to Aline. "Have you forgotten me? I would not have thought it possible that anyone could do so."

In spite of her trembling Aline forced herself to look at him. In her expression I read fear and sympathy for a cruelly

wounded creature, but no recognition. "No," she finally whispered, "I don't remember."

I said, "At least you remember Miss Ross, doctor?"

For a long moment he continued to gaze at Aline; then slowly he turned to me. "Very well, indeed. Miss Ross has been one of my most interesting patients." His voice was deep and calm with a faint Russian accent. It was a soothing voice, almost hypnotic in its confidence and consciousness of power.

"Then," said I, "perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me a number of things which I have a right to know, both in my capacity as the lady's doctor and her fiancé."

Dr. Blystein bowed. "Allow me to congratulate you, sir. Here in Penzance I am something of a hermit and I welcome the opportunity to discuss so interesting a case with a colleague. But"—he lowered his voice—"perhaps Miss Ross would be bored by a medical discussion? And I should have to refer to some notes which I keep elsewhere."

I realized that he did not wish to discuss Aline's case in her presence. "I would be very interested to see more of your house," I said, "but Miss Ross is tired and I am sure she wouldn't mind waiting."

Dr. Blystein looked at his assistant, who still stood at the door. "Unfortunately," he said, "there is work awaiting me in my laboratory which I cannot delay. If you would be kind enough to be my guests at dinner this evening I think I can provide you with the information you desire."

We accepted.

"I think you will be interested in my library," said Dr. Blystein. "Heinrich will take you there. And now, I regret having to leave you until dinner." He turned and slightly bowed to Aline, "With

your permission." Abruptly, he left the room and as he passed the assistant, I noted that he was even taller than the man whom he had called 'Heinrich'.

I took Aline's arm and followed our guide through a long and sombre hall to the library, lined from floor to ceiling with open book shelves. When we had seated ourselves on a comfortable couch, Heinrich returned to the door through which we had entered.

"You'll be safer if the door is locked—on account of the patients, you know." With a quick motion he went out and closed the door after him. I heard the bolt click.

I ran to the door and tried it and called to Heinrich to open it, but there was no answer. I returned to Aline with so much assurance in my manner as I could muster.

"I have been thinking it over," she said, "and I am afraid we have come on a wild goose chase. In spite of Dr. Blystein and my letter, I am certain that nothing possibly could have wiped out the memory of having seen that man before."

It would have been cruel of me to explain to her that his very ugliness might have been instrumental in causing the aphasia, for his was an image that the mind would eject, if it could. "I am very much inclined to agree with you," I lied, "but since we are here I suppose it will do no harm to hear the doctor's story."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Rack of Souls

I FELT far from easy in the locked library of this strange old house. So, quietly, lest I disturb the sleeping girl, Aline, who had fallen into a doze, I stole to the only other break in the walls besides the single door. Heavy velvet por-

tierres hung in front of what I had hoped might be the doorway to another room, but I pulled them back only to discover a small window. Through its opaque glass filtered the feeble rays of the dying day.

Heavy iron bars outside cast parallel shadows on its surface. I let the curtain fall back in place. This room in which we were so securely held might have been any oubliette of the Bastille. It was not a comfortable thought.

I walked toward the shelves of books and examined them first with idle interest, then with mounting consternation. The first book I had opened was Foxe's *Early Christian Martyrs*. Amused, I returned it and chose another volume in an ancient binding: *A Hystorye of Satanysme, Together with some Account of ye Black Masse*. Another book, I found, greatly to my surprise, was a French novel of a type which may not be imported to any other country. It pretended to deal with the career of the bloodthirsty Marquis de Sade, but only a casual inspection would disclose the fact that it was merely cheap, salacious fiction, obviously designed for the consumption of sadists—those neurotics who take their name from the mad author of *Justine*.

As I continued my tour of the library, in the back of my mind there was slowly being formed a theory which connected and explained the wide variety of books. But I finally realized that the one thing common to them all was that each was concerned with the sensations of pain or fear, or both.

My chilling speculations were suddenly interrupted by a scream from Aline. Until that second I had not known how nervous I had become. I rushed to her side and found her violently trembling.

"What is it?" I asked, "What has happened?"

She took my hand between her own and held tightly. "I'm sorry," she said,

"it was only a dream—but it seemed so terribly real. It was about Dr. Blystein." Her manner became pleading. "Need we stay to dinner? Mayn't we go now? We could come back again tomorrow."

"But why not stay a little longer now?" I asked, "And then not ever come back."

"Because—because nobody knows we are here. We didn't tell anyone—and we should have!"

I felt instinctively that she was right. "What!" I said, "That sort of thing simply doesn't happen—not in England, at least. We would be traced," I added lamely.

"How?" she asked.

"Exactly. Well—there are ways, I expect." And it was a shock to me to realize that already I anticipated the necessity of being traced.

In a moment the door opened and Dr. Blystein and his assistant stood revealed in the dim illumination of the hallway. The assistant bore a tray of cocktails, which he served us.

The drinks were mild enough tasting, but I no sooner had finished my glass than I felt dizzy. I dimly remember trying to walk to a chair, and then blackness closed in about me and there was nothing but the rushing tide of unconsciousness blotting out everything . . .

WHEN I awoke I found myself sitting stiffly and uncomfortably in a chair, and when I tried to move I found that I could not. Then, in a flash, full consciousness returned to me. I discovered that I was fastened to an elaborate kind of wheel chair by a number of metal clamps; two around each arm and leg, one around my waist and one around my neck. Held in this way it was impossible to make any movement, whatever.

I looked about and found that I was in a tremendous gray room. The walls and ceilings were entirely covered with

what looked like thick cloth padding. There were no windows, but the room was brilliantly lighted. Dr. Blystein entered and drew up a chair facing me.

"So," he said, "my patient is beginning once more to take an interest in life!"

Immediately, of course, I began to protest heatedly and demanded to know the meaning of this outrage. With a gesture, Dr. Blystein stopped my flow of words. "Please save your breath," he said. "You will need it later, I assure you. It is the first time I have had the opportunity to discuss my experiments with a colleague." His manner was calm and serious. "To begin at the beginning, the experiments I mention are voluntarily in theory and in effect, and for you to appreciate them fully you will have to forget much that you have learned at the Sorbonne."

"And why should I be interested?" I asked.

"If for no other reason," he answered. "because both you and Miss Ross are shortly to become the objects of my experiments."

"And what makes you think that the police won't interfere with your little plan? How long do you think it will take them to find us here?"

Dr. Blystein smiled. "Forever. I may have forgotten to mention that there is a highly sensitive microphone in the library. You were ill-advised in discussing the fact that you had told no one of your intention to visit me." He rose and moved around to the back of my chair, dismissing the subject as a matter of no importance. "As I expound my theories I will take you for a tour of inspection of my equipment. You are sure to be interested."

He started to push my wheel chair, without interrupting his conversation. I fully realized the futility attempting to escape and therefore I concentrated my

attention on the doctor's conversation, hoping to gain some true insight into my predicament. He stopped my chair in front of a dynamo and then leaned against it, facing me.

"This," he said, "supplies most of the power for my work here; the machinery of my laboratory is necessarily cumbersome, but quite efficient, as you shall see. But before we continue our tour I must give you a resumé of the reasoning which led to my discovery.

"You may think me crazy when I tell you that I have succeeded in separating the soul from the body. But, I am going to present you undeniable proof. I maintain that I am the first person to effect the divorce of the body and soul in a sure, scientific manner. And, except for the stupid and erroneous ideas of the clergy, I am the first person to be able to give the soul any actual definition."

I thought it best to humor my captor. "And what," I asked, "is the method of procedure?"

"I am coming to that," said Dr. Blystein. The tone of his voice was academic and gave the impression of a professor addressing his class. "In the past the soul has often been known to leave the body before death. I will give you an instance: Probably you know that in the ancient days of the church, no inquisitorial chamber was complete without some member of the witch-pricking profession. The theory was that it could be determined whether a woman was a witch by discovering that place on her body which had been touched by the devil. It was characteristic of such devil-touched spots that they were anaesthetic—dead to all feeling. So, of necessity, we had the witch-pricker whose sole equipment was a long, sharp needle.

"The subject would be stripped and stretched before him on a table and he would bury his needle in those places

which seemed most likely to have attracted Satan's attention. If the subject screamed and showed signs of suffering, the spot had not yet been found. However, in time, the probe was almost sure to find a place where no pain was felt and so the woman was proved a witch and was sent to the stake, forthwith."

"**B**UT," I protested, "that has been explained long ago. If the nervous system is too violently treated it becomes insensible to pain. It is simply hysteria."

"And what," asked Dr. Blystein, "is hysteria? That is the great fault of medicine—that when you cannot understand a thing you give it a name and let that satisfy you. I have found that hysteria is usually the result of the temporary separation of body and soul. You will understand that is part of my theory that pain may be an extremely useful agent in causing such a separation, for the reason that the soul inhabits the body only so long as the body is habitable. And that is to say that the soul is definitely influenced by the physical condition of the body and remains within it only provisionally."

Dr. Blystein seemed to become more preoccupied, more intent upon the exact exposition of his thesis. He went on: "Now I will make a statement which will surprise you. So far as I know it has never been made before; yet it is so simple and it explains much that has heretofore been mystery—mystery into which only charlatans have dabbled. What I am about to tell you is this: The soul is a thinking parasite that leads an intelligent existence, completely independent of the body from which it derives its nourishment!"

Almost my interest conquered my terror. "With what evidence do you support such voluntarily statements?" I asked.

"Shortly you are to become a link in my chain of evidence," Dr. Blystein replied. "At the moment I will not trouble you with the manner in which I have been able permanently to take every vestige of soul from persons who otherwise became perfectly normal. Suffice it to say that I have done so. And, because in these persons there is absolutely no sign of instinct: love, hate, morals or, in fact, volition, I have come unavoidably to the conclusion that all feeling and all desire are merely expressions of the will of that separate-thinking thing: the soul!"

As you can imagine, during all this time Aline had been foremost in my thoughts; but I had not mentioned her, partly because I was afraid to hear the reply and partly because I did not wish to run any risk of angering the doctor. Now, however, I could no longer refrain from introducing the subject. "Where," I asked, "is Miss Ross? And what do you intend to do with her?"

"Oh yes," he said, "I had intended to show you the equipment. That will be a good place to begin. I will take you to her. But, before I do so, I must thank you for having conducted an experiment collateral with mine, which interests me very much—I mean Miss Ross. You may have guessed that she was one of the successful products of my laboratory? When she first came to you she was completely without soul, but she regained it in the course of the blood transfusion. Not, you understand, her own soul but particles of those of whomever were the donors of the blood. I know, as well as you, that her lapse of memory was due to the return of soul which would not allow her to remember what she had experienced."

Somehow, I was not surprised. I felt that I had anticipated all this, though actually, of course, I had not done so. I made a great effort to be calm. "But, Doctor," I said, "when I first saw Aline I

certainly recognized no excessive sign of hysteria."

"Have I not told you," exclaimed Dr. Blystein, "that the people turned out by my laboratory are perfectly normal, otherwise? Day after day I drive out their souls with pain, renewed and intensified, until that thinking soul abandons all hope of re-inhabiting the body it has deserted. Then, I treat the patient's physical condition—health is restored—and I have created the robot! The servant without morals, without impulse, without any volition of his own. The perfect servant who knows no demand! My reply to the world's crying need!"

DR. BLYSTEIN beckoned to his assistant. "Push the chair, Heinrich," he said. "We will go to see Miss Ross, who is now in the primary stage of the process which will expel her soul for the second time."

My chair was rapidly wheeled about, and, with Dr. Blystein walking at my side, we traversed the length of the laboratory. One thing in particular I noticed was an enormous glass bell, fully eight feet in diameter and ten in height, similar in shape to those one may see covering cheeses in delicatessen shops. Just outside it was a large, motor-driven pump with pipes which led to the interior of the bell.

There is certainly a limit to the ability of the human mind to accept ideas and impressions foreign to its experience. I know that in my case I had already arrived at a curious state of detachment in which I simply did not believe what was happening. It was as if something had severed two parts of my brain, and one half busied itself with the observation of an unreal hideousness while the other, sick and stupefied though it was, refused to become alarmed at such obvious absurdity.

We left the laboratory by a heavy iron door, which clanged to behind us.

You may think it strange that I can describe in cold details what I saw in the little stone room which we had entered. Perhaps I was already mad—perhaps I went mad there. It would have been surprising if I had not. But, I know from this moment and in the monstrous days that followed, I felt neither horror nor hate nor even sympathy for Aline, though I knew her lost to me forever.

The whole of my being was concentrated in one desire—escape. I became an inhumanly cold and calculating machine, with the sole purpose of remembering and analyzing every finest thing I saw and heard, for only thus would I be able to form a plan.

Dispassionately and accurately, then, I can describe what I saw.

We were in a small, white-tiled room, without windows. The floor, too, was of tile which sloped toward the middle, where was a sunken pool some two or three inches in depth. In this pool stood Aline's nude body. Her arms were suspended by cords from the ceiling and metal bands around her ankles secured her feet beneath the water. From overhead a fine spray deluged her shining skin. Her eyes were covered by a black band. As we entered, two curiously dressed persons had suddenly sprung away from Aline's side and now stood, apparently awaiting some word from Dr. Blystein.

For the moment he ignored them and turned to me: "Let me explain this treatment," he said. "It is really quite ingenious and is composed of the combination of two agents—beating and electric shock. You will see that my two helpers are clothed completely in rubber. That is because the paddles which you see in their hands are made of extremely flexible metal and connected by wires to an electric circuit, completed by a wire which

makes contact with the pool in which the patient stands. The liquid which sprays her is, of course, salt water—an excellent conductor. So, when the paddles touch her skin an electric charge passes through her body and she experiences both the sting of the blow and a very satisfactory shock. But, perhaps you would like to see the device in operation?"

At a gesture from the doctor the two rubber-lad figures approached the suspended girl, and took up positions one on each side of her. The instruments which they held were composed of a thin plate of metal about the size of a saucer, which was attached to a wooden handle by means of a strong spring about fifteen inches in length. From these "paddles," heavily insulated wires ran to a switch board which stood at a little distance.

UNTIL now, I had hoped that Aline was unconscious, for apparently she was relaxed in the lines which held her up. Her beautiful head lay against one arm and only the deep, sobbing exhalations of her breath attested to the fact that life's spark still glowed in that glorious glistening statue. Now, at a word from him, Dr. Blystein's soulless servants raised their fiendish instruments and struck Aline, one on the breast and one on the the thigh. Such an instant and terrible reaction I have never seen.

Her head jerked back and my ears were pierced by a cry of mortal agony. Beneath her satin skin I could see each muscle tensely quiver, yet outside of a slight reddening which, before the next stroke descended, I noticed on her gorgeously molded breast, no visual evidence remained of the violence that had been done her.

"Follow the usual procedure," said Dr. Blystein. He turned to me and explained: "For a period of three hours she will alternately be treated for ten minutes and

rest for ten minutes. Now we will go on with our tour."

We left the room and re-entered the laboratory, and, as the door closed, the screams of the suffering Aline were instantly cut off. We stopped in front of the glass bell which had already drawn my curiosity.

"This," said Dr. Blystein, "has proved a particularly efficient invention. You will have noticed this pump. With its use I can create inside either tremendous pressure or almost absolute vacuum. This is the way in which I use it: First, with the patient inside, I slowly build up quite a remarkable pressure. Then, after a sufficient lapse of time, I abruptly release it. As you may know, the result—one of the most painful sensations it is possible to undergo—is comparable to tetanus in that every muscle and nerve in the body is affected—and the effects last for some days. Overdone, of course, it would be dangerous, if not fatal. But, I am careful. I have not yet had a patient fail to recover—eventually."

My last memory of that day was of Dr. Blystein's sudden interruption of his monologue when he felt my pulse. I must have fainted then. When I awoke I was again in the same chair, but this time in a small bedroom. I had been undressed and, glancing at the bed which had been slept in, I guessed that I had been put there in a drugged condition. For the imprint of a body was still visible upon it.

A few moments after my waking, a young woman entered my room carrying a breakfast tray. One glance at her cold, expressionless eyes was enough to tell me that she was another of Dr. Blystein's soulless creatures.

"Your breakfast," she informed me. "Dr. Blystein has said I am to feed it to you." In silence she prepared morsels of food and raised them to my lips. I tried to question her, but all attempts at

conversation failed. At the end of the meal, which I ate with the utmost difficulty, the girl gathered up her tray and left me alone again in the bare little windowless cell.

In this identical fashion I consumed nine successive meals, served over what I suppose was a period of three days. I forced myself to take the nourishment because I knew that if I were able to devise some plan of escape I must have the strength to execute it. Each evening meal that I was served must have contained some sleeping potion, for during this time I had no memory of being put to bed, of sleeping or of being re-strapped in the chair.

No scheme was so fantastic that it was not considered and re-considered. At every appearance of the servant who had been assigned to me, I tried some new means of winning her to my cause. And, in the end, I realized that every hope I could conceive was fore-doomed to failure. Yet, to my three days in that cell, I owe the fact that I am now able to write this account.

As a student at the Sorbonne I had been extremely interested in the study of hypnotism and had made a number of varyingly successful experiments in the field. I had been interested to discover that I, myself, could enter into a state of hypnotic trance with comparative ease. The method which I had used was the usual one of fixing my gaze upon some bright object. Sometimes in so doing I had commanded myself to awaken at a definite moment and always my unconscious brain had heeded the order. The only illumination in my cell was one electric bulb in the middle of the ceiling. . . .

ON the morning of the fourth day I woke in my usual place, but this time in the presence of Dr. Blystein. "I have just been examining you, young

man," he said, "and I am delighted to find that you are well enough to take an interest in your surroundings." As he spoke, he began to push my chair. "You have missed three days, you know—it's a pity. I did want you to see the whole process. But, no matter; I can tell you what's happened."

He continued his uninterrupted speech as we entered the laboratory. He placed my chair just outside the big glass bell and next to a small switch board, on which were a number of dials. In front of this he drew up a chair and sat down.

"While we are waiting for Heinrich to bring our patient, I will give you some idea of her progress. Her first day, you saw. On the next she was allowed to rest—there is always at least one day of rest after each day of treatment. On the following day she was placed beneath this bell and air was pumped inside it until the pressure was sufficient to our purpose. Then, after she had spent an hour or so inside, it was quickly released. The results were entirely satisfactory.

"Her condition is now at least as painful as the last stages of spinal meningitis or tetanus, and is caused by very much the same contraction of the muscles, characteristic of the latter disease. By the way, I must say that her reactions, this time, are quicker and more definite than they were before. I do not know if it is because this is her second experience, or whether it is due to her somewhat lowered vitality. Now I will raise the bell and prepare for the reception of our client."

He threw the largest knife switch on the board and somewhere a winch began to revolve, winding in a cable which, running through a pulley overhead, was attached to a heavy ring at the top of the dome of glass. The bell rose to a height of about five feet and, stooping, Dr. Blystein entered its interior. Here he ar-

ranged a heavy plank so that it faced my chair and was only three or four feet from it which leaned back at an angle of forty-five degrees and was attached to a frame-work on wheels. At the sides of the plank were clamps, similar to those that held me in my chair.

Dr. Blystein emerged, saying as he passed me: "We will have a good view!" He returned in a moment, carrying a metal diver's helmet. From its top trailed two long rubber tubes. The helmet he attached at the head of the plank by means of a bracket; and then he placed the ends of the rubber tubes over two nozzles in the floor. He came out and stood before me, rubbing his hands together. "At last we are ready—and not, I see, a moment too soon."

Into my line of vision Heinrich wheeled a long surgical table, on which Aline lay strapped. She was still entirely nude and the bandage, which she had worn around her eyes when I had last seen her, had been removed. When they came to the edge of the bell, Dr. Blystein, himself, pushed the table inside, while Heinrich took up a position by one of the outside pumps. Methodically, the doctor released the straps that bound the girl. Then, stepping back a pace, he said, "Get up!"

At first Aline made no movement, but remained lying stiff and straight. Dr. Blystein repeated his command and then, with a low moan of pain, she made a feeble effort to rise.

He assisted her off the table and onto her feet and, completely unresisting as she was, he half-dragged, half-led her to the plank, where he fastened her by her arms and legs in such a way that she could not slide down onto the floor.

Now, he took the diver's helmet in his hands. Before he placed it over Aline's head there was one moment in which we were face to face. Our eyes met and

spontaneously I called her name. But neither my voice nor the sight of me evoked the slightest sign of recognition. Her wide, beautiful eyes no longer belonged to an intelligent human being, but were those of a hunted, tormented animal.

When the helmet was fixed over her head to the doctor's satisfaction, he motioned to Heinrich to attend to the pump and rejoined me. He threw over the double switch he had previously used and, with surprising speed, the great glass bell sank to the floor.

He turned to me and said: "Except for the pump, which supplies the helmet with air, this switch board governs all the conditions inside that chamber. With the turn of a knob I can create pressure or vacuum, heat or cold. Truly, if that is a world in itself—and I feel that you will come to think that it is—I am the God of that world! It is my own creation and those who have inhabited it are, at least, my re-creations. Let us commence our experiment."

He twisted a knob on the instrument panel, and suddenly the laboratory was full of the resonant sound of heavy machinery working. "The pumps are now withdrawing air from the bell, but it will be a little while before the patient feels any effect. At first, I suppose, there is a rather mild and pleasant sucking sensation at all of the pores of the body. For the moment, as you can see, she is comparatively quiet. Though gradual, the change is not so slow as to be boring."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Final Question

IN that brilliantly lighted laboratory I watched the transformation in Aline as if my life depended upon it. The terrifying vision attracted me as a snake attracts a bird. She was so close to me that, if my arm had been free and no wall

of glass between us, I might have touched her. I could not turn my eyes away . . . and this is what I saw:

Feebly, at the beginning, then madly, she twisted and struggled against the cruel clamps that held her. Quickly her strength seemed to ebb and she lay back again with her chest heaving, as if she were having difficulty in drawing breath. This, I realized, was not the case. On the contrary, because she was breathing air at normal pressure in the helmet and because outside pressure was already considerably lowered, she was having difficulty in expelling breath. Soon a confirmation of this fact appeared, for, as more and more air was pumped away, a considerable increase in the size of her chest was noticeable and this enlarging increased as the difference grew between the pressure in her lungs and the exterior.

Within a short while other changes could be seen. Her flesh began to swell and her white skin took on a pinkish glow. Her breasts, her abdomen and her thighs seemed to become at least twice their normal size. Presently I saw that those veins which are closest to the skin were becoming more and more marked. It was almost as if the blood vessels themselves were rising to the surface. Here and there ruby drops began to appear. . . . The poor, swollen body was crimson. . . .

Suddenly an exclamation of Dr. Blystein cut through the throbbing drone of the pumps. He went to the glass and peered intently through it, then hurriedly returned to the switchboard. The motors whined to a stop and I heard the squeal of the winch take their place. The bell began to rise and beneath its edge was sucked inside, with a noise like the filling of a tremendous bottle, the air which had been pumped out. Before my eyes, Aline's tortured flesh collapsed like a pricked balloon. Instantly, Dr. Blystein

rushed inside and removed the helmet from her head. He examined her closely and then looked at me. . . .

Again I must have fainted for when I awoke I was in my room once more. Blystein was seated on the bed. "How absurd of you, a doctor," he said, "to be so squeamish!"

"Is Aline dead?" I asked.

"No," said the doctor. "She will live to finish my treatments. Of course, at the moment she doesn't feel particularly well." He laughed in self-appreciation of his cruel wit. "As a matter of fact," he continued, "the vacuum treatment had a little more serious affect on her than I had expected—she must have been weaker to begin with than I had supposed. But anyhow, it was successful, and her soul is now expelled from every part of her body except her brain."

"And how can you separate the soul from the brain?" I asked.

"Oh, that," said Dr. Blystein suavely, "That is a matter of comparatively simplicity. The patient is first hypnotized and then informed that he is dead. The brain believes it and the soul departs this last stronghold. And so the treatment is completed."

My fingers itched to be at his throat, but I refused to allow my mind to cloud with rage. At that moment I held nothing in life so dear that I would not have given it gladly for the power to take Dr. Blystein's scarred neck between my hands. Perhaps he sensed my wish, for with a mocking smile on his hideous face, he got up and walked to the door where he paused, facing me. "You will be interested," he said before leaving, "to hear that your treatment will begin tomorrow. Until then—pleasant dreams!"

I realized that the last frail hope lay in my making a desperate play for freedom while some particle of soul still clung to my brain. I was sure that any ordi-

nary person would emerge from Blystein's tortures with a broken will and mind. I knew that it was hopeless to try to evade the physical suffering. I prayed that I would be more successful with the mental part.

To this end I intended to hypnotize myself by concentrating my gaze on the lamp in the middle of the ceiling, at the same time commanding myself not to recover consciousness until I was unbound and free in the presence of Dr. Blystein. You can imagine the super-human determination which I brought to bear upon my auto-hypnotic attempt. I think that never in history has a man had such awful incentive to success.

**I** WOKE to consciousness abruptly, though it is not usual in hypnotic cases, probably because that sense of self-preservation, which is at the core of every living thing, had been telling me in the days that had passed what I must do. I found myself where I had thought I would: lying on a surgical table under the raised glass bell.

As with Aline, Dr. Blystein had released my bonds and, with his back to me, was adjusting the helmet which he intended me to wear. Without thinking, without mental process of any kind, without feeling—I executed what I had planned. With the speed of desperation I jumped to the floor, ducked under the edge of the bell and reached the switch on the instrument panel which I had seen Dr. Blystein use to lower the heavy glass dome.

In the few seconds it took in its descent I lived through untold agony of suspense. Not until it reached the floor did Dr. Blystein know of his imprisonment. Then, with an expression of incredulous surprise, he turned toward me and shouted, but no sound penetrated the

glass. I turned a knob and the pumps began to throb.

Heinrich had looked around when he heard the bell descend and, in a glance, he must have seen the turn events had taken. I had expected that even should my plan against Blystein be successful, I would still be likely to lose my life at the hands of his assistant. But I had forgotten that Heinrich, being without soul, was also without allegiance. Slowly he walked to my side and sat down.

It took Dr. Blystein a long time to die. We watched his struggles and his efforts to break the glass grow weaker and weaker. We saw him sink to the floor, gasping for breath, tearing at his collar. We saw the buttons fly off his clothes as his body expanded. We saw his eyes pop from his head and finally we saw him explode, exactly as if a charge of dynamite had been detonated inside of him. . . .

I have said that what has gone before is a question; not a story.

Dr. Blystein is dead. His shattered remains have been burnt in his own electric furnace. His establishment is scattered to the four winds. Somewhere his servants are living or dying without hope, without emotion, without soul.

And Aline and I remain. All but that soul which has clung to our brains, to our imaginations, has fled. We are, in a sense, people with only memory of soul. As for me, I would far rather that all my soul had gone . . . .

**A**ND this is my question: Someone among you who read this history knows that he is soon to die. Will such an one be so heartless as to withhold from us that soul which is soon to abandon his body? Will it be so bad to relinquish only a few hours of life and let that soul-imbued blood flow into our veins?

*Will you give us your soul?*

# DEATH DANCERS

by Arthur Leo Zagat

*Author of "Black Laughter," etc.*

*Their clothes were winding sheets, their weapon madness—when, in the full of the moon, they held their obscene carnival of doom on Dark Mountain!*

WHEN I saw that strange clearing for the first time, plunging out from behind the screening evergreens, the hairs at the back of my neck prickled and I was chilled by a sudden inward cold. Perhaps it was the oddly ominous shadow as the sun dropped below Dark Mountain's looming peak; perhaps the way our dog, Joseph, with the coat of many colors, growled and cringed against my feet, communicated to me a feeling of something horribly wrong about the place. Perhaps it was neither of these but an adumbration of the horrors that had been and were to be enacted here that I sensed impalpably tainting the tree-hemmed circle. Whatever it was, I was not the only one to feel it. Art Shane, and Jimmy Carle, our chainman, stood rigid as I, staring through slitted eyes and breathing a bit hard.

"What do you make of it Dan?" Art asked finally, his lusty bellow hushed for once.

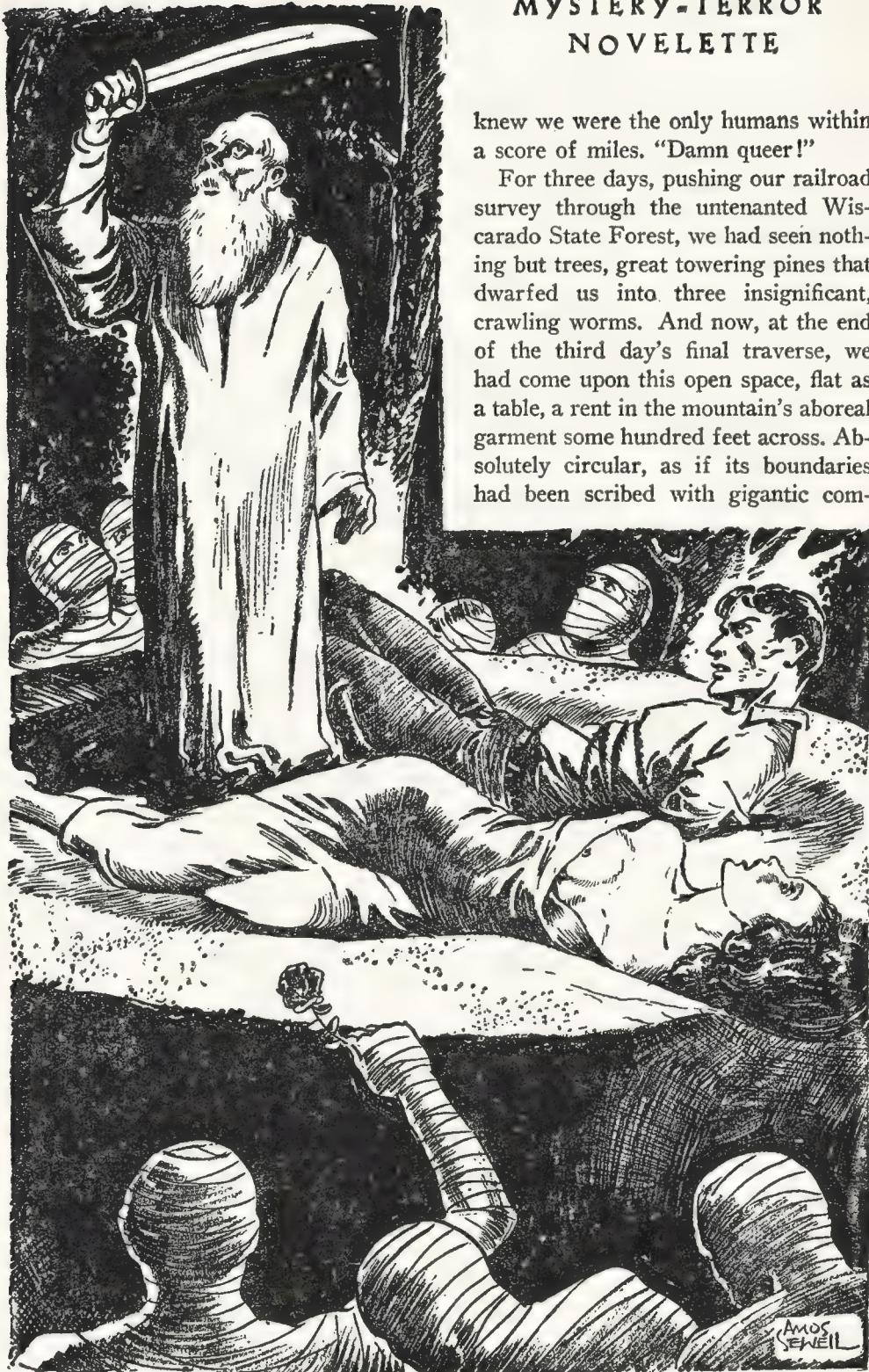
"Queer!" My slow monosyllable was almost whispered, though as far as I



## MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTE

knew we were the only humans within a score of miles. "Damn queer!"

For three days, pushing our railroad survey through the untenanted Wis-carado State Forest, we had seen nothing but trees, great towering pines that dwarfed us into three insignificant, crawling worms. And now, at the end of the third day's final traverse, we had come upon this open space, flat as a table, a rent in the mountain's aboreal garment some hundred feet across. Absolutely circular, as if its boundaries had been scribed with gigantic com-



passes, it was obviously man-formed. Natural causes could never have attained such regularity. Nor had the clearing been recently made; its floor except at the center, was covered with too heavy a growth of grass and vines for that.

Except at the mathematical center! There a thirty foot ring was absolutely bare, the earth showing, clean! Within that, the hub of the whole formation, was a single huge boulder, gray-green and lichen-covered, a squat, flat-topped cylinder immemorially aged. This also was obviously not the work of nature, neither in shape nor position. Humans had formed it and brought it here, years ago.

It put a man furiously to think. How, for instance, had they hauled that giant stone up here? And why? *Why had that central ring not been overgrown, long ago?*

I shuddered, then reddened. Swell chief of a survey party I was making, getting the jitters over finding an unexpected clearing with an old stone stuck in the middle of it! I could imagine what dad or John Hepburn would have said could they have seen me. The old Tiger, with the first Dan Hale at his elbow, clawed his way across half a continent, fighting savage nature on the one hand and the no less savage Wolf Hopper and his gangs of Estey roughnecks on the other. And here I was getting cold shivers up my yellow spine over the first thing that popped up that was not cut and dried! I clenched my fists and swore under my breath.

"Come on," I said. "I'm going to look that rock over."

I started across to it, and the others followed. I got a glimpse of eighteen-year-old Jimmy's face. His lower lip was caught under his teeth and too much white showed in his eyes. He'd been nervous as hell all day, peering around tree trunks for things that weren't there. A weak

sister, all right. Too bad. He was a likable kid except for the streak in him.

Maybe he wouldn't have shown up quite so badly if it weren't for the contrast with Shane. My assistant was out of the Western Division and I'd known him less than a week, but there was a set to his jaw that I liked, and a competent swing to his big shoulders. He had a grin, too, that got under my skin . . . .

"Look at this, Dan." Art nodded at an oval depression in the rock's upper surface. "I'd say it was water-worn, but there's nothing to keep any weathering from affecting the whole top."

I am well over six feet, but the boulder rose chin-high to me and its diameter doubled its height. The shallow, bowl-like depression touched the edge at one point and from there a weathered groove ran straight down the stone's side. Where it reached the ground the earth was darkened, stained as if some dark fluid had soaked into it. I bent to examine the blotch more closely.

"Dan!" Jimmy squealed. "Art! What's Joseph got? What's the dog doing? Look!"

I jerked up, followed the kid's pointing finger. The dog was across the clearing, digging furiously. He was barking short, excited barks; and even from where I stood I could see that the hair on his neck was bristling like a ruff.

I was fed up with the carrot-topped youngster's jumpiness, with my own too.

"Go ahead and find out what he's doing if you want to," I growled.

They started away and I stopped again to get some of the stained dirt between my fingers. It was stickily granular. I looked at the mark it made on my skin. It was reddish-brown, grainy. It was dried blood!

Jimmy screamed, chokingly. There was horror in Shane's shout! "Dan! Come

here! Dan!" I whirled and hurtled across to them.

Joey was gnawing at something, growling. I got him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away.

The thing at which he was gnawing—protruding whitely from the disturbed earth—was a human hand!

**W**E GOT Joey tied to a tree, got the trench-spade from Jim's pack, and finished the job the dog had started. I felt sick long before we were through, and there wasn't much to choose between the fish-belly white of the kid's face and Shane's green mug. The man—there was enough left of him to tell he had been that—had been dead four or five weeks at least. His hair was very long and black, but his beard was shot with gray. There was no sign of any clothing having been buried with him.

His head lolled over, sidewise. It was I who uncovered it, and unthinkingly I reached to straighten it. The feel of his bloated flesh—God! I rubbed my fingers against my trouser leg, shuddering, saw the reason for the unnatural position of his skull. His throat had been slashed—sliced clear through to the backbone!

"What's that in his mouth?" I think it was Art who asked. "What is it?"

I forced myself to look closer. There was a thorny flower-stem stuck between the yellow teeth, and what hadn't moldered of the flower looked as if it had been a rose. Not a tiny wildflower, but a full-blown, cultivated rose!

"Where the hell did that come from?" I blurred.

"Never grew in the woods. Must have come from Pinehurst."

"But that's twenty-five miles from here, down the mountain. And I doubt whether anybody grows roses in that god-forsaken hamlet."

Shane shrugged. "More important to

know how the corpse got here. He didn't take that slice out of his own windpipe."

"No, and he didn't bury himself either. It's murder, Art, murder!"

We stared at each other. A chill ran through me.

Then I pulled myself together. "Whoever did it is a long ways away from here by now," I said. "We'll report this at the first town we get to."

"But . . ."

"But nothing. Our job is to get this exploration done. We're a railway survey party, not a posse of detectives. Lord knows we've got our work cut out to get through and get a report in before the time-limit. We'll cover this up, make camp, and be ready for work at sun-up."

"Camp?" Carle's voice was a croak. "Where?"

"Right here in this clearing. It's the best camp-site we've found since we started from Pinehurst."

"B-but this—" Jimmy squeezed out through white lips. "Th-this . . ."

"Great Jumping Jehosaphat!" I bel低owed. "The stiff isn't going to bother us any—not if we keep to leeward of it." My skin was still crawling with goose-pimples, but I wasn't going to let him know that. "The killer is hundreds of miles from here by now."

The kid's eyes were dark pools in the glimmering paleness of his face. "I can't, Mr. Hale—I can't sleep with this around—" He was staring at the grave. "I know I won't live through the night if I do!"

I grabbed his shoulder, whirled him around to me. "Look here, Carle!" I snapped. "You'll sleep when and where I tell you to, and do as I tell you, or you're through. For good. Quit on me now and I'll have you blacklisted on every road from Canada to Mexico!"

Shane put a hand on my arm. "Hey, Dan," he admonished. "Don't be so rough on the kid." A slow grin creased his big-boned face. "Remember you were a cub once yourself."

I shoved him aside. "Keep out of this, Shane," I grunted. "I'm in charge of this outfit and by God, I'm going to run it!"

Jimmy blinked, and his face was so woe-begone that I almost chortled in spite of my anger. But Art saluted; said, in a meek, piping voice, "Yes, sir," and bent to pick up the spade. "Come on, Jimmy," he added. "We'll shovel the dirt back while the boss picks out a spot." As I turned away I could just hear him whistling between his teeth, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?"

That made me realize what an ass I was, blowing about my own importance. Anyone could guess that this was my first big job in the field after being tied to a desk for more chafing years than I care to think about. I skirted the clearing edge and recalled what dad used to say about Hepburn, before dad passed on:

"The Tiger never raised his voice to one of us until he was ready to kick him out of camp. And then he was a holy terror. He'd stand there, pulling at the lobe of his ear with his big mitt and roaring like the big cat he was named after, and the chap he was bawling out felt just about big enough to crawl under a snake's belly. Glory be, when old John jerked his ear like that he sure pulled the latch-string to hell. If you make half the man he was, Danny boy, I'll smile in my grave."

To my left the mysterious rock seemed to loom a living, ominous presence, quiescent only for the moment. A strange hush lay over everything. I had a queer sense that some alien presence was watching me from the darkness of the trees. My hands shook a little as I knelt to start a fire.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Rose in the Moonlight

NONE of us talked much, after our meal of canned willie and baked potatoes was finished. The dog had chewed through his leash, and we'd had a devil of a time keeping him from again exhuming the murdered corpse. He was lashed tightly to a nearby sapling now, his muzzle bandaged to quiet his infernal growling. That incident had put the final damper on our spirits. We sat hunched moodily around the fire, each busy with his own thoughts. After a while I glanced at my wrist watch.

"Seven-thirty, fellows," I said. "Turn in. We start at sun-up."

Jimmy looked at me with lack-luster eyes. "I'll sit up and watch, Mr. Hale," he offered. "I can't sleep."

I jumped to my feet, loomed over him. "You'll sleep, young fellow!" I snapped. "If you aren't snoozing in thirty seconds I'll put you to sleep—with this." I pushed my fist against his eyes. "Understand?"

The lad looked up at me, his mouth working, not making a sound. I've never seen a face so miserable. Damn it, would I have to make good my threat?

"Take this pill, Jim," Art said smoothly. "That'll help you."

"No! I won't take any dope. I won't." His voice was edged with hysteria.

"It isn't dope, old man. Just bromides, to quiet your nerves. Swell to sober up on; that's what I carry them for."

The boy looked at my assistant like an adoring pup. "You—you're not kidding me?"

"May I be struck dead," Shane grinned. "Take it, bub."

"Thanks." He washed the white disk down with a swig from his canteen. Then he crawled into his blankets, and closed his eyes. In seconds he was breathing quietly.

Shane motioned me to the other side of the fire. "What say, Dan," he murmured. "Think we ought to set a watch?"

I could afford to be honest with him; there was no question about *his* guts. "We better had," I agreed. "I don't like the looks of things. Fellow that did for that corpse may still be prowling around. I'll take the first watch, wake you up at one."

"Oke. Watch the fire—it's getting chilly."

I made myself comfortable with my back against a tree. Somehow the fire-light seemed not to penetrate far into the close-pressing dark. The big stone was just a darker bulk against the black wall of the pines. I felt stifled. That feeling of being watched was upon me again. A half-dozen times I jumped at the crackle of a twig in the woods, the rustle of the breeze in the looming needles.

But after a while I yawned. The heat of the fire, the somnolent rustle of the pines, were getting me. I propped my lids open. So far things looked swell. It would take doing, but the route over Dark Mountain looked feasible. The L. T. & C. would yet be able to build the cut-off that would beat the Estey to tidewater by ten hours. Tomorrow would tell the story. Tomorrow—we'd start early—and . . .

A SOUND pulled me out of sleep—a welling sound, vast somehow as the mountain itself, yet so far down the scale of hearing that I felt rather than heard it, felt it as a tremendous vibration impacting my cramped body. I was on my feet before it died away, peering into the darkness. The fire was low. Nothing seemed to stir, not even the blanketed forms of my sleeping companions. The sound was gone—if there had been a sound. I tried to convince myself I had dreamed it.

But I couldn't shake off the unreasoning dread that oppressed me, the vague

sense of impending catastrophe. For some reason I connected it with the monolith in the clearing's center—forced my gaze to the stone. And saw that, exactly at the point where its edge was nicked by the descending groove, a tiny light glowed, silvery-blue and unearthly!

My scalp tightened for one horrible instant. Blood hammered in my temples. Then the explanation came to me and I laughed, shortly. The mountainside we were on faced east. The moon must have risen, far down on the forest-hidden horizon, must be slanting its rays up along the tree-tops. And one thin beam, sifting through by some trick of foliage, was just touching the boulder's edge.

Hell of a watch I was keeping, falling asleep! Not much but embers was left of the fire. I got a chunk from the pile we had gathered, walked rather unsteadily to the flickering mound and placed the new fuel where the blue flames still licked feebly. The resinous wood caught—flared—threw light along the ground. And I froze.

It couldn't be there—what I thought I saw on the side away from the sleeping men. Against all reason that it should be there—a single rose, erect on its short stem, nodding gently. Red as a gout of blood! I rubbed my eyes—looked again. It bobbed gently in the faint breeze.

There had been a rose in the mouth of the bloated cadaver—a rose where no rose could possibly be. And here was another! A blob of red in the flickering, eerie light—sinister . . .

How had it gotten there? Who had stuck it there in the earth—what prowler moving silently from out of the forest gloom?

"Roses in the moonlight . . ." A phrase from some forgotten poem threaded through my numbed brain. They had brought death to—someone. Was this rose too a mocking prophesy of death?

Long waves of cold swelled up through me—chills of abysmal fear. I stared at the thing with widened eyes—saw that a square of white was impaled on one long thorn. . . .

After an eternity I found strength to move, to bend and slip that paper off. There were words on it, crudely printed words that are still burned into my brain:

STRANGER, YOUR WAY IS BARRED!  
GO BACK OR TREAD THE DANCE  
OF DOOM!

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Flight in the Dark

**F**IRELIGHT flickered across the paper and made the words dance. Dance! The Dance of Doom! What was this threat—what did it portend? *What was the Dance of Doom?*

Suddenly then, while staring at the paper, a new tenseness struck at me—a new fear. There was no sound, no flicker of movement. But I knew there were eyes upon me—eyes from somewhere in the blackness—watching me. My corded neck ached with the slow effort to raise my head, to turn it, slowly, in a long, fearful scanning of the clearing's edge. My straining eyes came slowly around to the point in that dark arc where I knew the grave of the murdered man to be.

And there—at that very spot—a vague, pale form glimmered against the forest gloom. Was it moonlight, the dim, cold luminance by which I saw it, or did it glow with its own spectral light? The phosphorescence of rot, of sepulchral decay?

It was motionless—and I unmoving—while supernatural terror rocked the very foundations of my reason. And then, after an eternity, it moved—backward or forward I could not tell—but it did move—and vanish.

Something—some awful clamor of my soul for assurance that this thing was real and not an emanation from the desecrated grave—flung me into action. My feet drummed across the clearing—hurled me past the looming monolith and on toward the point where the apparition had been.

And with movement came thought. It was someone alive—human. It must be! The killer—the killer, of course! It was the killer and I was not armed. Yet I prayed it might be he. Otherwise . . . My left foot thudded into soft earth—the grave. The forest was just ahead. I wrenched to a stop, listened.

There was sound, deep in the trees—underbrush crackling—a footfall. *Ghosts do not make sounds in the forest!* I plunged after—into moonlight spattered gloom—into a weird maze of gigantic black trunks—fuzzy bushes—soft slippery carpeting of fallen needles. I caught a glimpse of a flitting white form, twisted to it, skidded, and caromed off a rough boulder.

There was my quarry—gliding through the thicket that hindered me, that snatched at me with its brambles, lashed me with its low-hung branches. It glided so effortlessly, and I forced passage so painfully—yet somehow I never lost sight of it—never lost hope. Always it was just ahead—just to the left or right. When I stumbled, when I fell and heaved myself up with the gasping thought that now—now surely—it would be gone, I saw it instantly. But always beyond my reach. Always just beyond my reach.

A strange, uncanny, voiceless flight and pursuit that was, through the immemorial forest, through the light-splotched darkness. The first madness of the chase went from me, reason functioned, and even as I darted, plunged, through the tearing briary bush I knew fear again.

For it was plain, plain as the rod-line

in a transit eye-piece, that I was trapped—lured and trapped. This form I pursued, this killer who thrust roses in the mouths of his victims, was baiting me, drawing me on and on into the forest, far from my companions, far from any who could answer my call for help. He could lose me at any moment—lose me and then swoop on me from behind some bush, some dark covert, slash my throat, and thrust his infernal rose between my teeth. Leave me there to rot, with the rose of death between my lips.

That was his plan, and I knew it, now. Yet I ran on after him—ran on and on—while the fingers of terror plucked at me from the darkness and dread pounded in my breast. I must keep him in sight, must keep his flitting, white, incredible form in front of me. For as long as I saw him I was still safe—but only as long as I saw him. . . .

HOW long would this simulated flight, this hopeless, fear-laden pursuit, continue? How long could it continue? My feet were ton-weights at the ends of my weary legs, knives twisted in my heaving breast, my face was criss-crossed with deep, bleeding scratches. Only terror—terror of that moment when I should see him no longer, when he should spring aside, vanish, haunch and leap on my unsuspecting back, his blade whetted for slaughter—only that terror spurred me on. Even that—in minutes—would not be enough.

And then it happened. A widening of the moonlight in a wind-rift—a fallen tree trunk. . . . He tripped on an outflung, dead branch. I left my feet in a frantic dive, got hands on his robe—jerked him down as he strove to rise—heaved and got my body over him, pressing him down. I raised my fist to smash him—and did not strike!

For it was a woman's face that stared

into mine—panic-twisted! Long brown hair tumbled down, twined around my stiffened arm that held her! And the warmth of a woman's body struck through to mine that pinned her down!

I heaved upright, not loosing my grip on her arm, dragged her up with me. Blue light slanted down into the wind-riven opening, shimmered over the lithe, full-curved figure to which the white robe clung, half-revealing, painted her face with its soft luminance. The face was young in its hazy frame of hair, its wide mouth red-lipped, nostrils flaring, somehow feral. A face done in broad strokes, square-jawed, high cheek-boned. A pagan face, not beautiful, and more than beautiful.

Young! But in the great dark pools of her eyes lurked something old as time—a fear ancient when these towering arboreal giants were seeds, wind tossed—a fear that must have crawled in the very womb of the world. *And that fear was not of me!*

I knew it, gasping for breath and clutching her arm in that moonlit glen—knew it as though some thought-current flashed between us. She was afraid, ghastly afraid, of something that stalked these woods. I knew then she had not sought our fire to warn or slay, but to seek sanctuary with us from some peril whose very presence hushed the tiny creatures of the wild.

A moment I swayed, the pall of her dread folding over me like a shroud covering us both—and then I cursed myself for a fool! For my eyes—dropping—caught a red device on her robe, over her heart—a red emblazonment of a rose, full blown, so marvelously worked it seemed alive. A full blown rose . . .

Anger surged up in me, gave me back my voice. "What is the *Dance of Doom*?" I gritted through clenched teeth. "What is it?"

The fear in her eyes flared—and suddenly was gone. Not a line in her face changed, but expression was gone from it, humanness was gone. It was a mask—chiseled from stone, and those eyes veiled, emotionless. She spoke, and her voice was without inflection. "I do not know."

"You damn well do! You left that note for me. What's it all about?"

Her lips tightened.

"By God," I mouthed. "I'll make you talk. I'll . . ."

Something stopped me—a crackle in the underbrush just behind me, a soft footfall. I twisted to it. And crouched, staring.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Madman's Chant

HE WAS tall, immensely tall, the old, old man who stood there, unmoving, and his seamed face was suffused with wrath. His deep-sunk eyes blazed from their hollow pits, the very hairs of his white beard seemed to writhe with a terrible anger. His thick cudgel was raised over my head. In instants it must come down and crush my skull. It quivered—a soundless scream tore at my throat! But it did not fall.

Instead, from behind the screening of his beard a booming voice filled the forest with hollow sound. "Stranger—your way is barred!"

The thick staff did come down, now, but slowly. It came slowly down till it pointed straight at me. "Go back! Leave the forest. Or you will surely tread the Dance of Doom!"

I was crouched, gaping at him, gaping at the bony, skeleton hand that clutched his stout club, gaping at the white robe that cloaked his giant form. I could not force my eyes up again to meet this blazing ones—dared not. For I knew that if I did I was lost. Even so, even with my

eyes fixed on the red rose over his heart, terror shook me as a dog shakes a captured rat.

And then—perhaps the extremity of my fear broke down in a small measure the barrier between two worlds—I seemed to hear my father's voice: "The devil himself couldn't stop Hepburn—the devil and all his imps. He'd claw the heart out of Lucifer quick as shooting if he tried to bar his way." Dad had drummed the saga of the old Tiger's deeds into my ears till they had become a very part of my soul—and now his wisdom was justified. Fear seeped out of me. I straightened.

"Go back—Like hell I will! I'm putting a railroad through here, and you, with all your nightgown flummery and red rose monkey business, can't stop me!"

If anger had reddened his eyes before, a very hell of fury flashed from them now.

"No railroad shall ever profane this good ground," he said.

"No?" My muscles tensed, ready to grab his stick if he made a lunge at me, and my voice held steady. "Try and stop me!"

"You persist?"

I thrust my jaw out and met his blazing eyes with my own. "Yes!"

"Then you must dance!" He took one backward step and was gone in the darkness of the clumped trees.

Curiously, I could not hear him go. But those last words of his rippled fear up my spine again. Not because there was a threat in it, but because there was pity. Pity and an odd sadness. It was as if he were sorry for what was going to happen to me.

I looked around. The girl was gone, too, of course. I had let go of her when the old man appeared, and she hadn't waited. I couldn't get her out of my mind. That look in her eyes . . .!

I'd better get back to camp and wake

up the boys. This thing wasn't over yet, not by a damned sight. There was a gun somewhere in my pack, too. I'd be more comfortable with the feel of that in my hand.

I started off—and stopped. Which way was the camp? Up or down? To left or right? I hadn't the slightest idea. I didn't know which way I had run, chasing that girl, nor how long, nor how far. I might be right on top of the clearing, or I might be miles away. I bit my lip, tried to think. No. *I couldn't remember.*

**I CURSED.** Nothing to get scared about, for I could always get to civilization by going downhill. But that wasn't what bothered me. This damn nonsense might hang up the survey days. And I had to get my report in in forty-eight hours. If I didn't, Wolf Hooper would have the L. T. & C. under his thumb again and the Tiger's whelps would be licked for the last time.

It was twenty years, almost to the day, since Hooper had smashed John Hepburn, taken the Louisiana, Texas and California away from him, and sent the old fighter into the limbo of some sanitarium for the mind-weakened rich. Two decades had passed before the time was ripe for Hepburn's old crowd to stage the sensational stock-exchange raid that wrested the Tiger's road from its bondage to Southern Transcontinental, and started a new war whose next battle had been staged in Wiscardo's legislature. A battle that had bled Hepburn's boys white to win—if it had been won.

There was but one way to lick the Estey gang so that they would stay licked. If we could build a cut-off through State Park, over Dark Mountain, it would take ten hours from our running time and get back the traffic of which Hooper had bled us, the traffic we needed to stay alive. We had clawed a bill through that gave us

the necessary permission—with a time limit. Hooper had sneaked that joker in, that time-limit of ten days to begin construction. And we must post a half-million dollar bond for completion before a shovel was turned.

The L. T. & C. treasury was almost dry. If the line could be run at ground-level we could post the bond, start grading, and clinch the franchise. But if it were necessary to tunnel—twenty miles of bore, that meant—we were sunk.

And that was what I was here to find out—had found out with only a shadow of doubt remaining. One more day's work and I could be sure. That was why I could not seek safety in flight down the mountain, why I *must* find the clearing and the camp.

Besides—Good Lord! What might happen to Art and Jimmy in the meantime? They were asleep—confident I was on watch. If I didn't get back . . .

*What was that?* A long wailing sound from my left—far off. There it was again, nearer. A wail that rose and fell, rose and fell, half-human, half—something else. Nearer still. A thin crescendo, vibrant with fear. A heavy body threshing through the woods. A gibbering howl. Words. Words I couldn't make out—but human words. The threshing, the wailing were thunderous now, were upon me!

Something crashed through into the little clearing, thudded against me before I could dodge it, sheered off. I saw horror-struck eyes, a white face. Jim Carle's face! He plunged on. I dove after him.

"Jim!" I cried. "It's Dan, Jim. It's Dan!"

He whirled—snarling. His mackinaw was ripped from his shoulder, his shirt was in shreds. There was a long knife-slash across his cheek. His hand was bleeding.

"Dan!" he gibbered. "Dan! They've

got him—they've got Art." A sob ripped from his lips. "Oh God! They've got him! Come on. Run!" If I hadn't seen him talking I should not have known that squeak for his voice. "Run or they'll get us too!" He whirled, started off again.

I grabbed his belt, hauled him back. "Wait!" I snapped. "What happened? Who's got Art? What have they done to him?"

He jerked, struck at me. "Let me go! They'll catch me. They'll catch you! Come on! Run!" He was completely mad, insane with fear! He ripped a clawed hand across my face. "*Let me go!*"

"Let you go, hell," I grunted. "We're going back—back to help Art!"

"No!" he mulled. "Not back there! Not back to them! Never!"

Shane wouldn't have given up without a scrap. This—this yellow cur had left him to fight alone. I must go to Art—help him. But I couldn't let this terror-blind kid rave through the woods, alone. He'd be dead before morning, he'd bat his brains out against some tree. What to do?

"Let go!" He twisted and sank his teeth in my hand.

My bunched fist cracked flush on the button. He collapsed, sprawled. Clean out.

He'd be off again when he came to. Off again to death in the woods! I ripped his web belt from its loops, jerked free his wrap leggings. In seconds he was lashed, bound to a sapling. He couldn't get away, now, till I was ready to come back for him.

God forgive me! I bound him there, helpless, powerless to defend himself. But he knows I meant it for the best!

**N**O difficulty now about finding the clearing, for Carle had trampled a plain path through the brush. I took it

at a run—through splotched light and black pools of shadow, passed blacker bulks concealing an unnamable threat. At last I sniffed wood smoke and slowed. If they were still there—if Shane was still alive, still fighting—only a surprise attack could succeed. I dropped to the ground and crawled, sliding almost soundlessly through the brush.

There was no sound from the clearing ahead. . . . A lump formed in my throat. I was too late—Art Shane was dead. I would never warm to his grin again. I stopped, and earth-smell was like grave-smell in my quivering nostrils.

Panic shrieked, gibbering, in my brain. "They're waiting for you. They've set an ambush for you. Turn and run. Turn and run, before it's too late." I lifted—and stiffened.

I could not abandon Art. Perhaps he was not killed. Perhaps they had left him—*whoever "they" were*—lying out there in the clearing, unconscious, bleeding, dying. I must go on. *I must know what they had done to him.*

I started crawling again. And now a sound *did* come from ahead, a sound that rasped nerve ends of ancestral fear. A curious chanting sound. A blood-curdling ululation, rhythmic but unmelodic, that pulsed to me through the forest darkness, that beat to me, and around me, and within me, that thumped, thumped its savage rhythm within my very brain. Vague, ancient memories stirred in me, gripped me with primordial fear. I envisaged shuffling feet; brown, shuffling feet; aboriginal feet circling in a dance.

The darkness broke. I glimpsed red embers of a dying fire, just ahead. Belly to the ground I snaked those last few feet, inched my head beyond the last obscuring tree.

Red coals glowed, out there. I saw rumpled blankets, tossed aside; our piled packs; stacked instruments. But no sign

of any human, no sign of Art Shane's torn body. Clear now, and loud, the savage dance song thumped against my aching eardrums. I forced my gaze to the clearing-center whence it came.

Moon-glow had broadened, making a lake of light that bathed the rock and filled the earthen ring. And in that ring a huge, stark-naked figure shuffled and swayed and postured in time to the pulsing, thudding rhythm of his own primal chant! He faced the great monolith as he danced, bowed to it in savage adoration, postulated to it in obscene worship of the bulking stone. His song throbbed in my veins, beat in my blood, till it was all I could do to hold myself from dashing out there and joining him in that primeval idolatry.

And then I saw the descending groove in the rock-face, saw that it was dark, that it glistened, wetly, a slow pool forming where it reached the earth. My eyes lifted. Mounding above the stone edge a black form bulged—a head lolled in the niche where the groove began. The head twitched. The form writhed.

"Art!" His name ripped from my throat and I was on my feet, was hurtling across the clearing. "Art!" Oh my God! Was Shane stretched atop that sacrificial stone? Was it Shane's blood that dripped so slowly down that damned groove? Horror hurled me at that dancing, savage figure. Horror and the lust to kill, to tear Shane's murderer limb from limb! "Art!"

The naked dancer whirled to meet me. I saw his face, his gibbering, twisted face.

This chanting savage, this aboriginal postulant, this nude sacrificiant who trod the Dance of Doom, was—Art Shane!

I SKEWED to pass him, dug heels into the ground and twisted to confront him again. His eyes were wide, glazed and unseeing. There was froth

on his contorted lips and his nostrils flared. "Art!" I cried. "Art Shane! What are you doing? Art!"

He stared at me. His brow furrowed—then cleared. His mouth worked.

"They come," he intoned in a strained queer voice. "The Children of the Rose gather to the sacrifice. Earth drinks blood, rose-red, and the clan gathers. Come dance, brother, dance." His hands beat the time of his interrupted chant, and his body swayed. "The hour of Doom approaches. Dance, brother, dance."

Mad! He was staring mad! What had driven him so? He was no neurotic, no yellow-streaked weakling like Jimmy Carle. What horror had struck at him from the forest to drive reason from his mind? What was the sacrifice whose blood oozed down the stone?

A whimper answered me, a whimper and a low growl. I ventured a swift side glance. It was Joseph, the dog! Joseph, with his throat cut and his life-stream feeding the thirsty ground. Joseph, who quivered and died in the instant of my darting glance.

"Dance!" Shane leaped at me, grabbed my arms, trying to force me into his insane revel. "Dance!"

I thrust him away from me. "Art! Art Shane!" I shouted. "Stop it, Art!"

He reeled back to me. Somehow, hideously, his every movement kept time to the barbaric chant to which he had danced, the savage rhythm that still pulsed in my brain. He reeled back and pawed at me. "Dance, brother. Dance!"

No use. There was only one way to stop him. My fist jerked back.

But the blow was never completed. In that instant I was seized from behind! An iron grip clamped my wrist—swung me around.

I was in the clutch of the old man of the forest! Instantly, as his fingers had seized my wrist his eyes seized mine. They

were deep, dark pools, into which my own gaze sank. They were all the world, and terror writhed in them. Suddenly I was powerless, unable to move, while a dull sense of utter defeat swelled within me.

His voice came from a great distance. "Stranger. Have you seen the power of the Rose of Doom?"

I heard a response. It must have been I who made it. "I have."

"Do you still wish to tread the Dance of Doom?"

My flesh crawled. I knew now, or thought I knew, what that meant. "No!"

"Is the way across Dark Mountain barred to you and yours?"

Almost, I said it. But something, some last faint remnant of will, stopped me. My teeth clamped on the word. For suddenly I knew that if once I voiced that "Yes," if once the syllable those compelling eyes demanded found form in sound, I was lost. I should be released—to stagger back down the mountain with that "Yes" deep planted in my consciousness. And it would find expression in a lying report to the men who trusted me, Hepburn's boys, my father's friends! "We cannot build over Dark Mountain. The way is barred."

But if I refused—I heard the gibbering of Art Shane behind me—felt the tom-tom of savagery in my blood. If I refused—would I become as he? The twin pools of hypnosis, into which my aching eyes plumbed to find only unending swirl on swirl of awful threat, held me captive. Fear hissed in my ears, "Say 'yes' and save your soul."

My neck corded, my veins were icy streams and my brow was cold with sweat. Tiger Hepburn would have *sold* his soul to build a mile of road. My throat worked, my tongue moved, and the word squeezed out: "No."

It broke the spell. "No," I shouted.

"No. We'll drive the line through in spite of your damned tricks!"

I jerked away from the old devil's grasp, leaped at him with fists flailing, reached him once. Then his club crashed down. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Messenger of Death

MUSTY earth-smell was in my nostrils, and the dank fetor of the tomb. Pain throbbed at the back of my skull, dull pain. I opened my eyes, blinked. A dim glow lighted rock wall, glistening with moisture, an arched rock roof, low-hanging. I tried to lift a probing hand to the agony in my head, could not. I was tightly bound. I was a prisoner—trussed like a hog awaiting the butcher's knife.

And what *was* I awaiting? The old man of the forest would never dare to loose me so that I might carry my story out of Dark Mountain. If this were not my tomb a grave waited for me out in the clearing, a grave like that in which rotted the corpse we had found.

I wondered if he would thrust a rose between my dead lips. "Roses in the moonlight. . . ."

This wouldn't do. I must think, must try to find some way out. I was still alive, still in possession of my right senses. Poor Art! The ancient in the white robe was a hypnotist, that was evident; an adept at the art. He had almost gotten me, as he had certainly succeeded in getting Shane in his power.

Somehow that decision eased me. For death itself is not half so horrible as insanity. To see one close to you, one who has worked shoulder to shoulder with you, to see such an one mindless, a gibbering lunatic, is worse than to see him dead. I think it was the collapse of John Hepburn's mind that killed my dad. I

shuddered again as I remembered Art posturing naked before that rock.

Slow footfalls paced slowly to my right, passed, came back again. The cave opening must be there. That must be a guard, posted to watch me. Was it the girl? Peculiarly enough, I realized I was anxious to see her again. The pagan beauty of her face was clear to my mind's eye, despite all that had passed since I glimpsed it. I could still feel the warmth of her slim body against mine.

I could move neither arms nor legs, but I could roll over. I did so, to the right. The mouth of the cave was just man-high. There was a rock wall opposite, a corridor of sorts, empty for the moment. The stone showed chisel-marks.

The footsteps came again. Someone walked slowly across the aperture, tall and white-robed. He glanced in.

"Art!" I exclaimed. "Art Shane!"

"Silence in there." He looked at me but I could swear he did not see me. His eyes were unfocused, their pupils unnaturally small in the dimness. "Silence!"

"Art. Don't you know me? It's Dan. Dan Hale."

For a moment his brow furrowed, as it had when I called his name while he danced. And, as then, the momentary effort was abortive. "Silence!" he said again. "He who has been chosen for the Dance of Doom must meditate in silence!"

He said it mechanically, in that odd, strained voice that was not really his... then turned away to resume his sentry-go.

Poor fellow! Somehow his fate seemed worse than mine. Was he destined to remain here forever, dragging out his life in a hypnotic trance, acolyte of God alone knew what horrible ritual?

Perhaps when the railroad came through he would be rescued—cured. But the railroad would never come through

now. Not the L. T. & C. I should never return to make my report, Shane would not return. When hope for us was given up it would be too late for another survey to work through. Hooper of the Estey would build the line then. I groaned. I had let them down, the men who had fought to revenge the old Tiger. The men who had trusted me because I was my father's son, bore his name. I had let them down!

**L**IGHT flickered, out in the corridor, yellow light that brightened as it approached. There was a faint whisper of nearing feet. Shane halted, lifted his head, expectantly. A candle, held in a white hand, appeared at the doorway edge, then a figure, a face. Brown hair rippling over shoulders white-clothed. The girl of the wood. The girl whose face I had wanted to see once more before I died.

Art advanced to meet her. "Is the hour of Doom at hand?" he intoned.

So that was what brought her here! She was the messenger of Death. Yet I did not care. What was the difference, she or another?

"Not yet!" Flat and inflectionless, the words dropped from her lips. "But it approaches. Have patience, neophyte." I noticed that she held the candle at arm's length, that its flame quivered nearer Shane than her.

"The call has gone out and the Children of the Rose gather," she said. Her voice dropped, I couldn't make out what she said next, but apparently she was giving him instructions. Art bent forward to hear her better, and for a moment they conversed thus, those strange, white-robed figures.

Then abruptly Shane reeled, flung out a hand to the wall, fell against it, slid down along it to the floor. The girl flung the candle from her, whirled, and came

into the cave. In her other hand, that had been hidden in the folds of her robe, a knife glittered. She knelt to me, and the blade lifted, poised. . . .

Sudden enlightenment seared through my brain. She was the executioner! A hypnotised man will not kill; they had feared Art's interference at the last. The candle's flame was drugged—he was out of the way—and now—

I jerked away, rolling. Useless to fight. I could not escape. But moments are precious—when they are the last you will live. . . .

"Don't," she whispered. "Don't. He may come!"

Astounding words! I stared at her. What did she mean? "Who?" I croaked, inanely.

"Hush. Oh hush. Don't ask questions. Let me cut those ropes!"

Then—then she had not come to slash my throat. She was rescuing me! Before I could recover from the shattering realization it was done. I was free!

"But why—why?"

A soft hand went across my mouth. Don't ask questions. Hurry. There's a chance—a tiny chance we may get out before he misses me." But I was answered. Her dark eyes were no longer mute, expressionless. Nor was it fear that made them starry.

And a leaping warmth in my own pulse responded to what her eyes told me!

"Oh, hurry!" She was insistent. "Follow me—and be very quiet. If he hears us—"

I got to my feet, winced as returning blood needled my limbs.

"I'm Dan Hale. Who are you?"

"Call me Nina. But come."

She was out of the cave. I followed her, stumbled over Shane's limp body. "Wait, Nina," I said huskily, and bent to it, heaved it to my shoulders. It was a staggering weight.

"Leave him!" she whispered. "You cannot escape with that load."

"No! He's my friend. I cannot leave him. Go on."

Just outside the cave mouth was another opening into the ground, and this we entered. It was a maze of rock-walled tunnels she led me through, a labyrinth I could never retrace. Towards the end I don't think I even saw them, so agonizing had become Shane's weight on my bent back. If it hadn't been for her hand on my arm, her whispered encouragement, I should never have made it. But at last we crawled out through a jagged hole and I felt the clean coolness of the open air again. It revived me.

"Where now?" I gasped, easing my burden against the vine-covered embankment that was all that showed of the underground system out of which we had come. The moon was almost at its zenith, and in its flooding light it seemed that every needle on the towering pines showed distinctly.

"Wait," Nina breathed, and crouched. listening. I listened also, and could hear nothing but the soft sough, sough of the breeze through dark foliage. But suddenly the girl put out her hand. "Down!" I could scarcely hear her. "Don't breathe."

Something of her panic communicated itself to me and I dropped, tensed. Just in time. For in a moment I too heard the soft pad-pad of footsteps and, not ten yards away, saw a form flit by, an unbelievable, ghastly shape!

It—whatever it was, man, woman, or something evil evoked from the forest mists—was swathed in white; legs, body, even its head wrapped in a tight white covering through which only the eyes were visible. It glided through the trees somehow unhuman, with scarcely a sound except that soft pad, pad of its swathed feet. And in one white-covered hand it

held a single rose—full blown—like a globule of blood.

"Good Lord!" I turned to Nina fiercely. "What is it?"

**S**HE looked at me despairingly. "That was a Child of the Rose. They are gathering for the Dance of Doom. The moon is full. He has called them and they are gathering." She was close against me and I felt her shudder. "I am afraid we are too late—the forest is thronged with them."

"In God's name who are these Children of the Rose? What are they? What is this Dance of Doom?"

"I—don't know. I have been here with him as long as I can remember, but always he has made me keep to my cave on the nights when the Children dance. It—it is something horrible—that I know. For the sounds that came to me from the forest on the nights of the full moon—" She made a gesture, that, and the look that peered from her eyes, told me enough.

"He! Whom do you mean? The old man?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"I think—he is my father. He must be, he has been so very kind. Only in the last week he has changed. He has been moody—curt. I have been frightened. And today he told me that it was time I joined the Dance of Doom." Her eyes widened. "His face was terrible when he told me. I—I wanted to run away—but I did not dare. Then—then I saw your fire, and—"

I put my hand over hers. "I know. I rushed at you like a madman and scared the wits out of you."

"You could not have known. But—when I saw you—when you held me—I knew I had been waiting for you—all my life."

She said it simply, like the child of

nature she was. And I thrilled to it. Words rushed to my lips. I choked them back. Time enough for that when we had won through. I took her hand, held it tightly.

"I know a path down the mountain that is hidden," she said after a moment. "Shall we try it?"

"We'll have to," I answered. "It's suicide to stay here." I had my own ideas about what the Dance of Doom entailed. I hadn't forgotten the grave in the clearing, nor what the hypnotised Shane had done to the dog.

"All right," she responded. "Come."

I turned to lift Shane again, and hesitated. Our progress through the forest must be swift, swift and stealthy, if I were to get Nina away. Carrying Art would make that impossible. We would surely be traced and caught. Dared I leave him?

"We could throw these vines over him, hide him." Nina's low voice chimed with my thoughts. "I think he will be safe till morning, and then the Children of the Rose will be gone."

I nodded slowly. No use sacrificing all of us in a vain attempt to drag him along. He'd have to take his chances. I got the thick leaves over him and turned away.

"Come," she said.

The girl stole through the woods like a shadow, but my own clumsy progress seemed to be thunderous. We seemed to be to one side of the clearing. I was tensed, quivering. Every tiny sound, every leaf rustle seemed a threat. Once Nina dropped to the shadow of a bush. I dropped too, and another of the white-swathed apparitions showed momentarily among the trees. He passed, and we started off again.

Then we came to a trampled swathe through the brush, and I stopped. "My God!" I burst out. "I forgot."

She whirled to me. "What is it? What is it, Dan?"

"Jimmy, Jimmy Carle. I left him—off there—bound to a tree."

"Jimmy? Who. . . .?"

I explained, quickly. "We've got to free him, Nina," I said. "We've got to."

"But. . . ."

I turned down the path that marked his frantic flight. There was no time to argue, no time to debate. It would be murder to leave him there, bound, helpless. And it was only a few steps.

"There he is!" I exclaimed.

He was slumped against the lashings, his head sunk forward. I got to him. "Jimmy!"

He did not stir.

"Jimmy!" I stooped, put a hand on his shoulder. His head rolled away from me. I saw blood—a great gout of blood, already dry, dyeing his neck, his shirt front. His throat was slashed to the bone. And in his mouth—good God!—in his mouth a red rose was thrust, full blown!

A scream—stifled—close behind. I twisted. Nina was struggling in the arms of a white-swathed ghoul. Another was leaping at me. I lunged to meet him, my fist arcing. It never touched him! For another and another of the old man's masked followers swarmed on me, swamped me, bore me, threshing, to the ground. As I fell I saw the bearded ancient himself, eyes flaming and cudgel upraised, towering above me.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Last Chance

I WAS in the prison-cave again, lashed now beyond hope of escape. But I was not alone. Nina was there too, a prisoner, helpless as I. And from somewhere outside, faint, but clear, came a pulsing that I recognized. The chant of the Doom Dance, throbbing, thudding,

pounding its unholy rhythm into my quivering brain. But it was not one man alone that chanted the savage paean—it was a throng of white-swathed, ghastly fanatics. I had seen them, heard them, as Nina and I were carried back into this rocky maze from which we had thought to flee.

We did not talk, I and this girl I had found only to lose again so soon, so horribly. Only our eyes clung, drank each other in. We dared not speak . . . for dread was a crawling, live thing in that cave. There had been no mercy in the old man's face as his voice had boomed, out there in the forest glade, just before they bore us away: "She who would rob the Rose must feed the Rose. The good ground will drink deep tonight."

A footfall thudded, in the entrance behind me. They were coming for us. I tried to smile at Nina.

"Hale!"

I rolled over at sound of Art Shane's voice, his old voice, and hope flamed within me. I stared up at him. He was still in the robe of the Children of the Rose, but his eyes were no longer dazed. Had he come out from the hypnosis that held him—had he come to save us?

"Nasty fix you're in, Dan. Nasty mess." There was something gloating in the way he said it, something reptilian. But surely he was normal once more.

"Looks like it." I said steadily enough.

"There's a way out. If you're not a stubborn fool." His words dripped down to me, dripped down from a mouth that scarcely moved. "You just have to say the word."

"What do mean?"

"Look?" He pulled the flap of his robe open. Beneath it he was fully clothed, and two holstered automatics hung from his belt. "Those nuts aren't armed—I can shoot a path through them. Promise me to report that the route over Dark

Mountain is impossible, and I'll do it."

The floor heaved under me, and my head swam. "But it is. You know it, man. It's easy."

"Know it? Hell! I knew it a month ago, when I surveyed the cut-off for the Estey. That's when I ran across the old bird in the night-shirt and fixed up this little entertainment for you."

"Then you're—"

"Working for Wolf Hooper. Sure. now you got it. Did you think he laid down on the job when the bunch of paupers that sent you out licked him at the State House? There's twenty grand in this job for me, and I'm a ring-tailed pussy-cat if I haven't earned it."

"You're telling me the Children of the Rose are fakes!"

"Oh, they're straight enough. I come from this neck of the woods; always knew there was some kind of cult up here that had the idea Dark Mountain belonged to them. So when the boss nut popped up I knew just how to play him. Fell right in with him, admitted the way was barred, kidded him good and proper. When he put it on me would I join his outfit I jumped at the chance. Reckoned I could use them if we lost out on the franchise. Figured on scaring out anyone the L. T. & C. sent to look things over."

I tried to throw the contempt, the horror, I had for him, into my eyes, my voice. "You inflamed them to murder to win your filthy pay!"

He shrugged. "I didn't think it would come to that," he said, "but you were mulish and they got out of hand. What the hell! It ain't the first time guys have been croaked in a scrap between the two roads. Tiger Hepburn did plenty of it in his day."

"But that was clean fighting, with an even chance. This. . . ."

"Cut the gabbing. What do you say. Promise?"

It was Hobson's choice—whatever my answer would be. Either way we were licked.

"If I agree," I questioned, "you get me and Nina out of here?"

"Hell no! I'm not including the girl. I'm not taking a chance on her—she might ball up the works. The two of us will have a tight squeeze as it is."

A red haze swam across my eyes. "You rat!" I snapped. "You can go to hell!" To save her I might have made the rotten deal. But now. . . .

He licked his lips, grinned. How could I ever have thought his smile pleasant, friendly?

"Just as you say, Hale," he laughed, "I like it better this way but I though I'd give you a chance. When this is over, I'll go back and make the report myself. Boy, how I will weep when I tell them a landslide buried you and Jimmy."

The chanting was growing louder, closer. Shane looked furtively around and slipped away. I had time only for a whispered, "Heads up, sweetheart," to Nina before the obscene procession appeared. A long line of white-swathed mummies pranced in, circled around us. Two bent to me, two to Nina. They lifted us and a long animal howl punctuated the horrible rhythm of their hymn.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Dance of Doom

THE clearing was a bowl into which the moon, almost overhead, poured merciless light. I lay, trussed so that I could not move, on the flat top of the monolith. Another bound figure was feet away from me. It was Nina, but she was outstretched in the oval depression whose use I had guessed, ages ago it seemed. Her head overhung the rock-edge, and her neck lay exactly in the jog that nicked it.

Squatted at my side, making doubly sure

I could not escape, was Shane—his eyes unfocused once more, his lips twitching in time to the swelling pulse of the dance. And above the prostrate girl loomed the tall, weird form of the bearded leader of the cult. Looking up at him, I fancied he towered to the very sky. In one gnarled hand a long, keen knife caught the moonlight, and at his feet two red roses lay.

But at the moment the terror of the scene focused in the earthen ring below and about the rock. They were circling about us, faceless, bodiless myrmidons of the Rose, circling and posturing and dancing, in a primeval measure whose utter abandon pale to mildness Shane's solitary prancing that had held me horror-stricken not an hour before. And from their hidden, muffled mouths came the chant of Doom, the thudding, thumping, booming voice of antediluvian fear, the murder hymn to some mad idol conceived by the crazed brain of the ancient. It was the voice of the wild itself—the very trees seemed to dance to its awful pulse—the very mountain to heave in its primordial rhythm. It was the quintessence of savagery, it was civilization abandoned, the triumph song of the ancient nature gods, come back to claim their own.

Suddenly it hushed—and silence thundered in the glen. I saw that the bearded priest of the lost religion had raised the knife—that he was quivering with some strange ecstasy. For a moment the silence held—then his voice boomed into the quiet:

"Children of the Rose, the night-orb nears its zenith—the moment of Doom is at hand. The good ground is athirst—and it shall drink deep. The good ground is athirst—and its thirst shall be slaked with the blood of him who would bind it with thongs of steel. Its thirst shall be slaked with the blood of her who is apostate to the worship of the Rose. Children

of the Rose—shall the good ground drink?"

And in a muffled, awful chorus the white-swathed, mouthless devils responded: "Let the good ground drink."

The ancient knelt, his knife poised over Nina's throat, his bearded face upturned to where the glowing disk of the moon was within a hairline of the meridian. In my ear Shane whispered, "What say, Hale? There's time, even yet. When he drives in the knife . . . They won't notice us."

"Go to—"

Just then the old man's free hand moved—crept up alongside his bearded cheek—and pulled at the lobe of his ear!

In that instant, faced as I was with death, this gesture of the madman struck me as if it had been a blow. Dad's oft-repeated words came flocking back to me. John Hepburn, insane, still lived. The old man's fierce glare of anger, like no other living man's . . . was he . . . could he be . . . ? Or was I going mad myself, mad from the certainty of doom. . . .

"Hepburn! John Hepburn! *Tiger Hepburn!*" My voice was a blast in that stillness. "Hepburn! He's a Hooper man! There's a Hooper man here! A Hooper spy!"

The old man jerked to me—and I saw sudden light blaze into his eyes. "Dan!" he said fumbling. "It's Dan Hale's voice!"

"John!" I took the cue. "John Hepburn! I'm Dan Hale. Wolf Hooper sent this fellow! He's an Estey spy."

Then Shane made his mistake. If he had kept quiet—or brazened it out . . . But he sprang to his feet, tore the robe from him, reached for his guns. The old man—Tiger Hepburn—leaped for him, his knife flashing.

Shane got one gun out and it blazed. The Tiger jerked back with the impact of the bullet, folded, and sprawled across

the stone. The knife slid from his flaccid hand, slid over the stone edge. John Hepburn had died as he had lived—fighting Wolf Hooper's men

Shane whirled to me, his gun snouting.

"You dog," he gritted. "You won't—" He stopped short. A white wave was breaking over the rock-top, a ravening white wave of swathed, horrible figures, more horrible now for their snarling, animal-like baying. Shane's gun thudded, but a mummy, plunging between, took the lead death meant for me. The others shrilled, "Kill Kill!" and Shane vanished under the white torrent.

I heard the body-muffled crash of his gunfire, once, twice. Then, as bandaged; plunging feet spurned me, kicked me from the platform, I heard him scream. That piercing agonized shriek rings in my nightmares, even now.

I rolled over, thudded to the ground, and felt a searing pain in my side. While that bestial chaos still raged overhead I twisted to see what had cut me, and sudden hope blazed across my swirling brain. It was the old man's knife! In cutting me it had sliced the rope binding me, loosening it just enough that I could jerk, get fingers on the black hilt, cut the bonds about my ankles.

I heaved to my feet, my wrists still

lashed together but my arms free and in front of me. The knife was grasped in my taut knuckles.

They had shoved Nina aside, near the edge, were dragging what was left of Shane to take her place at the sacrificial niche. They were intent on their gruesome task—did not see me reach up and slice that keen-edged blade through the ropes around her, did not see her roll off into my arms and join me in headlong flight to the shelter of the forest.

We got safely into their welcome gloom—but none too soon! For behind us a great shout arose:

"It drinks. The good ground drinks!"

I dared not glance back, but in my mind's eye I could see that dark groove, wet and glistening, could see the dark red pool gathering on the earth below.

As we stumbled through the trees, clinging together, sound followed up—thudding, thumping, rhythmic, horribly rhythmic, the chant of the Dance of Doom. It pulsed through the darkness of the woods; throbbed its savage, unmelodic cadence through the forest aghast; throbbed in my blood, in my brain, till the whole world seemed to beat primordial horror into my very soul.

Then Nina drew closer to me. I felt the warmth of her dear body, and my blood throbbed with a new rhythm.

THE END

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For April conjures up spine-tingling thrills and chills in terror-mystery stories by Hugh B. Cave—UNHOLY NIGHT; A. L. Zagat—DEATH DANCERS; Wyatt Blassingame—THE TONGUELESS HORROR; and others.

## STAR **WESTERN** THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

Run GUNMAN'S BLUFF with Max Brand in the April number of this great top-hand string of salty Western yarns. Man-sized tales by Olmsted, Wallace K. Norman, Rosaire, Foster-Harris, Mahaffay, and others.

## The **SPIDER**

April issue features the full-length novel, SERPENT OF DESTRUCTION, in which the *Spider* seeks out the most vicious killers ever assembled under one dark banner. Also Selected short stories.

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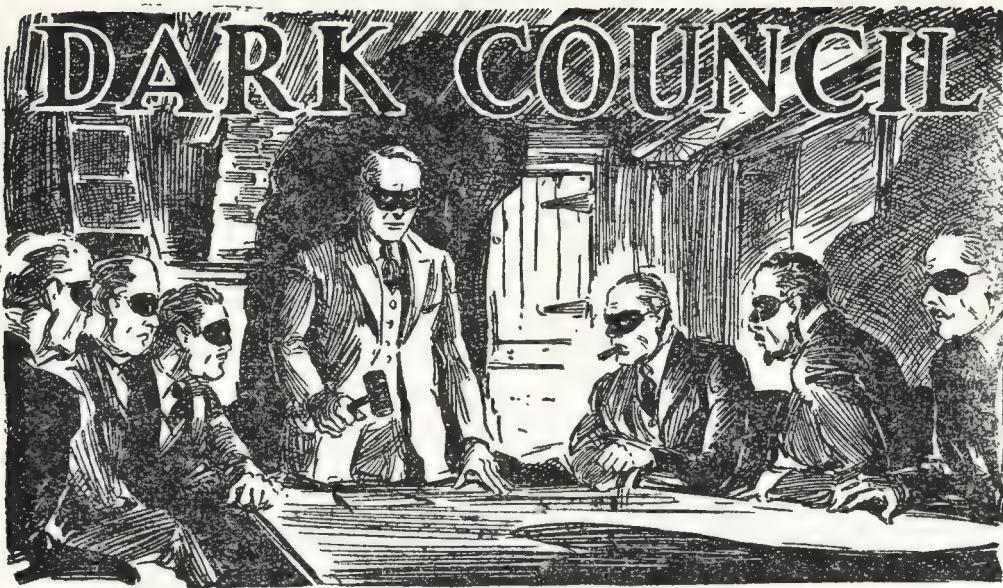
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THE thunder storm was dying away. And now the two women could hear the branches whipping the roof-top, pattering like footsteps in the growing silence. Like the patter of soft footfalls hastening back and forth in the room overhead!

Suddenly Mrs. Proctor stumbled up out of her chair, her thin, wrinkled face working with terror.

"It ain't the branches," she gasped. "There is somethin' up there—somethin' walkin' about!"

The big black cat that had been growing more and more restless with the slow passage of dragging minutes let out an unearthly howl. In one terrific leap it sprang to the top of the lace window curtain and hung there, its tail thrashing insanely.

Margaret leaned forward and grabbed up the pistol, ran across the small room to the hall door and pulled it open. A blast of wind lashed her in the face. Upstairs, one of the windows, closed by the women half an hour before, had been opened. . . .

Behind Margaret the light went out, extinguished by the wind. Now she stood in pitch darkness, with Minnie

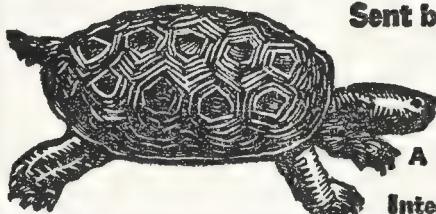
Proctor's terrified sobbing rising above the snarling of the big cat. . . .

\* \* \*

A small glimpse, this, into James A. Goldthwaite's next novelette, "Hands That Kill!" It's scheduled for the next issue of *Dime Mystery*—and it packs more chills, thrills and mystery in each and every chapter than does the average yarn from start to finish. Needless to say, it is co-featured with the usual spine tingling assortment of terror and mystery tales which have, in a few short months, made this magazine a leader in its chosen field. . . . Novels and novelettes by Arthur Leo Zagat, Franklin H. Martin, Wyatt Blassingame, as well as "Strange Sepulchers," a real taste of terror by H. M. Appel—all these, and more, will be waiting for you. Here, in *Dime Mystery*, you will find, as always, the weirdest stories ever told—by authors who are masters of their eerie craft!



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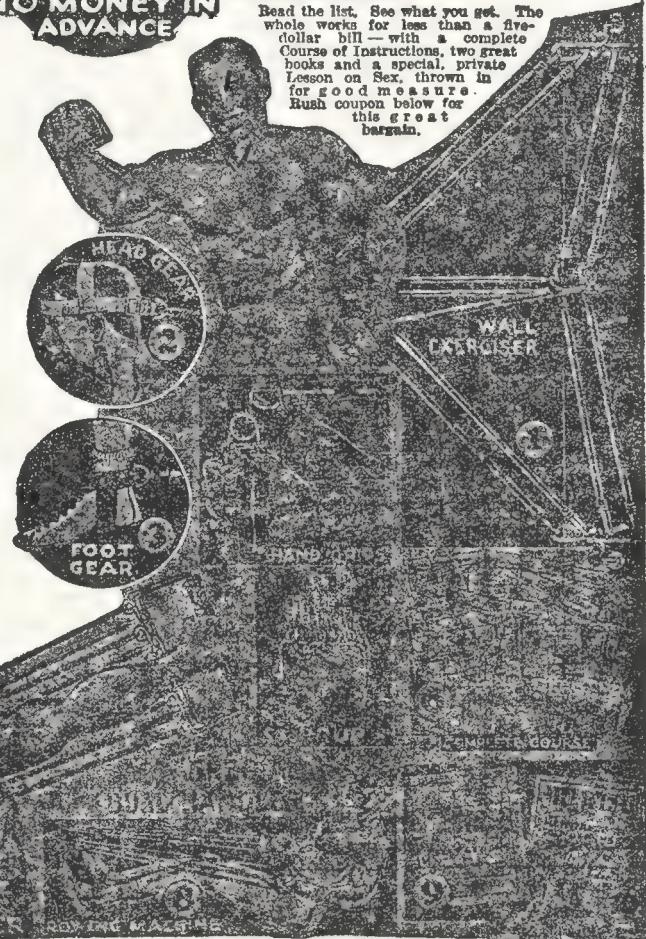
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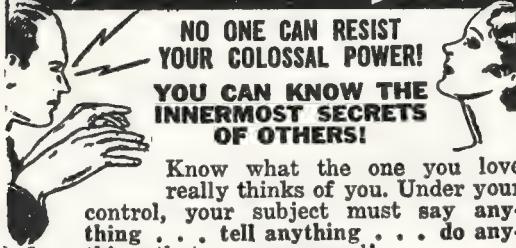
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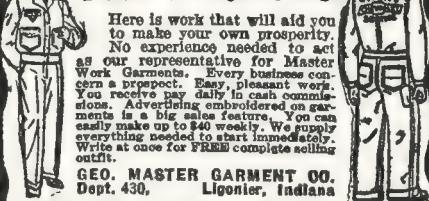
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